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Jacob Parappally

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

Jesus and Consecrated Discipleship

Edited by:

Jacob Parappally

Malloossery P. O.,

Kottayam - 686 041

Kerala, India

Tel: (91) (481) 2392530, 2397017

Mob: 9495519775

E-mail: jcmanalel@gmail.com

Web: www.jeevadharma.org

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Editorial

Consecrated religious life is in crisis today. The crisis consists in the fact that some religious men and women are struggling to discern whether their way of life is in consonance with their call as religious or blatantly secular. It is not a question of dichotomizing sacred and secular, this-worldly and other-worldly as it was done traditionally to differentiate 'religious' from 'secular' priests and lay people. Religious life has evolved to a great extent to overcome those biblically unfounded, theologically untenable and spiritually meaningless dichotomizations. But the religious identity as a sign of the Kingdom and in the Church *a sign within the sign* seems to be losing its sign-value for which it is called into existence. Many fear that it is almost losing its 'saltiness'. They are committed to a radical following of Jesus Christ deepening their baptismal commitment. They have left everything that would have given them success, security, identity and recognition. But they find in themselves as well as in the religious congregations, orders and societies a resurgence of the same secular values sometimes in their naked forms or camouflaged as 'a contemporary spirituality of secular involvement'.

The call of "Year of Consecrated Life" is to renew, re-vision and re-found religious life that it becomes an effective sign of the Kingdom of God where humans can unfold themselves and become authentic humans in communion with God, other humans and in right relationship with the world. It is the call of the hour as many women and men who realized within themselves the call of Jesus to follow him radically and responded to it wholeheartedly find themselves confused about the way this call is lived in their religious institutes. Over institutionalization of the foundational charism, transformation of apostolates into well-

structured, rigid, complex, secure, comfortable and often profit-making services like that of secular agencies and even competing with them, worldly values of struggle for power, domination, unhealthy competition, misuse of the means of communication for spreading misinformation and even calumnies about the members of the same religious institutes and others, the dwindling number of vocations to religious life etc., are some of the symptoms of a crisis in consecrated religious life. Unfortunately, the religious women and men who are called to transform the world into God's Kingdom are being transformed by the world. Those who are called to renounce everything to follow Jesus radically are accused of following "moneytheism" than monotheism.

There are many good religious men and women who through their self-emptying love and service influence the lives of people both Christians and believers of other religions effectively and positively. But the structures and the institutions they belong to are often anti-witness to the values they proclaim. The present issue of *Jeevadhara* reflects on the mystical and prophetic vocation of consecrated men and women as radical followers of Jesus. The call to discipleship is not limited to religious women and men but to all who are committed to Jesus and his values of the Kingdom. However, those who are called to live a radical commitment to follow Jesus cannot make compromises with regard to their discipleship. It is the cost of discipleship that makes the consecrated religious life effective and authentic.

In the first article of this issue of *Jeevadhara*, "Jesus and Consecrated Discipleship: The Mystical and Prophetic Dimension of Consecrated Life in the Indian Context" by P. R. John discusses the relevance of living and witnessing to the mystical and prophetic dimensions of consecrated life. He argues that to proclaim Jesus and his transforming message effectively in the Indian context of deep religiosity and extreme poverty, those who are called to commit themselves to a consecrated discipleship need to be both mystics and prophets like Jesus. The source of Jesus' life and ministry was his Abba-experience and this mystical experience was manifested in his prophetic mission of identifying himself with the marginalized and the

condemned in the society. Those who are called to follow Jesus radically cannot have any other pattern of life other than that of Jesus who is the centre of the life of a consecrated person.

Isaac Padinjarekuttu outlines the historical development of religious life in his article, "Consecrated Life as Counter-Culture: Historical Impulses for Its Reinvention Today". In order to face the challenges to religious life today one has to answer some fundamental questions about religious life. The questions can be raised about the origin of religious itself in the Church. What influenced some to accept a radical way of following Jesus? Why did some Christians leave everything and embrace a life of total renunciation and absolute surrender to the person and message of Jesus? The history of the development of consecrated religious life shows that this radical way of living Christian faith and witness needs to be re-invented and renewed from time to time because the culture and the ways of life it challenges are changing.

Shalini Mulackal discusses the challenges to religious women to live effectively and meaningfully their consecrated life in her article, "The Meaning and Significance of Consecrated Life as Women Disciples of Christ". Does the Indian context in general and the situation of women in particular pose any challenge to the understanding and living of Consecrated life? How are the women religious expected to live their consecrated life, their radical discipleship in such a way as to denounce patriarchal systems and attitudes, mindsets and customs that cripple women to live as full human beings created in the image and likeness of God? In the given context of women's dehumanizing situation, there is a need to explore how women consecrated to God and committed to follow Jesus radically, can live their lives prophetically and meaningfully.

In his article, "Flexible Communities of Spiritual Seekers" Sebastian Painadath, explores the possibilities of renewing religious life in dialogue with other religions. The consecrated persons are seeking to deepen their intimacy with Jesus and grow in their Christ-consciousness. The more one is grown in this Christ-consciousness, the more would she or he grow in openness and communion with those who are seeking God in other religious traditions. The traditional pattern of a rigid *religious*

community with the three vows does not enthuse young seekers any more, he opines that, perhaps, the time has come to explore other forms of consecrated life.

In the Year of the Consecrated life, *Jeevadhara* acknowledges the contributions of many religious women and men all over the world and especially in India who inspire, challenge and enthuse both Christians and the people of other religions and ideologies to live a better human life by reaching out to others in need, especially, the poor and the marginalized. Some religious had to give up their lives as martyrs and some continue to struggle against the forces of oppression and stand for the values of the Gospel. One of those religious who lived the call to a prophetic and mystical life with an exemplary and radical commitment to the marginalized was Thomas Kochery, a member of the Redemptorist congregation. He belonged, especially, to the poor and the oppressed of the Indian society. Till the end of his life on 3rd May, 2014, he championed the cause of the Fisher people and gave voice to the voiceless. He was associated with *Jeevadhara* by contributing articles on Indian liberation theology. On his first death anniversary, this issue of the *Jeevadhara* acknowledges his committed service to the Church and to the entire humanity.

Jacob Parappally

Editor

Tejas Vidya Peetha

Bangalore

Jesus and Consecrated Discipleship: The Mystical and Prophetic Dimension of Consecrated Life in the Indian Context

P. R. John

Jesus was a mystic and a prophet. As a mystic he had deep communion with his *Abba*. The gospels witness to Jesus' intimate and personal relation with his Father both in his silence and his words. His prophetic mission originated from his *Abba*-experience. He was recognized as a prophet but he was more than a prophet. He spoke with an authority unknown to his predecessors. In him both the prophetic and mystical dimensions of his life were well integrated. His disciples realized that it was their vocation to live in intimacy with him and proclaim the good news of liberation and salvation. They were called to be mystics and prophets like him, their Master and Lord. This radical discipleship of Jesus is the vocation of every consecrated person. The author of this article, P.R. John, SJ argues that without being a mystic one cannot become a true prophet. Dr. P.R. John, SJ holds a doctorate in historical-dogmatic theology from the Leopold Franzsens University, Innsbruck, Austria. He teaches systematic theology at the Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi. He is a visiting professor at Jnana-Deepa Vidya Peeth, Pune and Vinjananilayam, Eluru, Andhra Pradesh.

Introduction

From the outset of the Christian era, the central place of Jesus Christ and Discipleship (consecrated) evoked much theological reflection and the search continues to our days 'crossing the boundaries

and finding meaning in the whole service of humanity'.¹ Pope Francis counts on the religious to live out the mystical and prophetic dimensions of consecrated life rooted in Jesus Christ. He challenges the religious to 'wake up the world' through an authentic way of 'sharing the Gospel'. At the same time this: "radical evangelical living is not only for the religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way... to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth... a religious must never abandon prophecy" (29 November 2013). We live in times, where prophecy and mysticism are dying. Paul Parathazham's survey data (2004-2011) of religious in India clearly points to a diminishing prophetic zeal and social commitment among the religious.² The Consecrated Life in all its aspects must deal constantly with the reality of the mystical and prophetic dimension of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Mysticism and prophetism complement each other. Without being a contemplative (mystic) one cannot aim at becoming an active disciple (prophetic).

My purpose in this article is three-fold. I shall begin by presenting Jesus as a prophet and a mystic par excellence. I shall show that the consecrated discipleship is '*to be placed with Christ*' and '*to be placed in service*' (to the Church). Then finally I would like to point out a few areas where the prophetic and mystical dimensions of consecrated life can exist in Indian context.

Jesus as a Prophet

In the Old Testament prophet is the one who shares the divine concern, divine-purpose and divine participation. It presupposes the decisive intervention of God upon history.³ 'I will raise up for them a prophet like you (Moses) from among their brethren and I will put my word in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in

¹ Cf. Isaac Padinjarekuttu, *Consecrated Life through Two Millennia* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2008), 5.

² Paul Parathazham, "Religious Life in India Today: Empirical Investigations," in *Asian Journal of Vocation and Formation*, Vol XXXIX, No. 1 (Jan-June, 2014): 22.

³ P. B. Santram, "Jesus: The Christ of Mystical Union or the Prophetic Christ?" in *Religion and Society* (June, 1975): 126.

my name, I myself will require it from him' (Dt 18: 17f). The prophet speaks not about God but God speaks through him.⁴ The prophetic office is future oriented but rooted in the present. Malachi speaks of the return of Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, 'and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers lest I come and smite the land with a curse' (Mal 4: 5f). In the OT prophets are also called as servants of Yahweh (Jer 7: 25; Amos 3: 7).

'Jesus was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people' (Lk 24: 19). The crowds were amazed and said, 'Never has anything like this been seen in Israel' (Mt 9: 33). The New Testament attributed the role of – 'eschatological prophet' or 'servant of Yahweh' to Jesus Christ. 'Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights' (Isa 42: 1). 'You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased' (Mk 1: 11). The Gospels directly or indirectly portray Jesus as a prophet. The Pharisees demand for a sign to authenticate that Jesus is a genuine prophet (Mt 12: 38-42; Mt 16: 1-4; Mk: 8: 11-13; Lk 11: 29). The mighty Herod saw in Jesus the 'return' of John the Baptist (Mt 14: 1-2; Mk 6: 14-16; Lk 9: 7-9). The mockers after Jesus' trial made fun of his prophetic claims and when they blindfolded him, struck him and said, 'Prophecy'! (Mt 26: 68; Mk 14: 65; Lk 22: 63). We have the witness of Jesus' disciples at Caesarea Phillipi to the popular view that Jesus was one of the ancient prophets (Mt 16: 13-14; Mk 8: 27-28; Lk 9: 18-19). In fact, John's Gospel establishes the view that Jesus was not only a 'prophet' but he was 'the Prophet' who was to come, the eschatological prophet. Edward Schillebeeckx has claimed that 'the choice of the very first followers of Jesus (later to become Christians) fell upon the Jewish model of the eschatological prophet, with which they were familiar'.⁵ The early Christians applied the title 'prophet' to Jesus by virtue of their belief in what God has done to Jesus in raising him from the dead.⁶ Peter

⁴ Cf. Gerald O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* (United Kingdom: Oxford Press, 2010), 90.

⁵ Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, (Crossword Publishing and Collins, 1979), 473.

⁶ Edward T. Oakes, "Jesus Christ," in James J. Buckley (eds). *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism* (Weiley-Blackwell Publication, 2011), 298.

stood up and said, 'Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst... you killed, using lawless men to crucify him' (Acts 2: 22-24).

Jesus was conscious of his prophetic mission: 'A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house' (Mt 13: 57; Mk 6: 4; Lk 4: 24; Jn 4: 44). George M. Soares-Prabhu regards that Jesus' prophetic mission is deeply grounded in his experience of God. He experienced God as unconditional love at his baptism and identified himself with sinful Israel.⁷ The baptism of Jesus answers the desperate longing of post-exilic Israel, deprived of the prophecy of the Spirit. The long interrupted communication with God is re-established; the quenched Spirit is active again; the age of salvation has dawned.⁸ The dove-like Spirit comes down upon Jesus to 'anoint' him as the Servant Messiah: 'He said to me, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you,' (Ps 2:7), and from the first Servant Song of Deutero-Isaiah (Is 42:1) 'Behold my servant, whom I uphold my chosen, in whom I am pleased.' Therefore, the opening of the heavens indicates the dawn of the messianic age, suggesting the radical change in the relationship of humankind to God. The dove-like descent of the Spirit points to the ultimate outcome of his ministry, the creation of the eschatological community of salvation, the new people of God.⁹

Soares-Prabhu views Jesus' profound experience of God as '*Abba*' (Lk 10:21; Mk 14:36; Jn 11:41) irrupting into his life, which shattered the ordinary patterns of existence and impelled him to adopt the life of an itinerant charismatic preacher (identifying himself with the poor, despised, lepers, blind and the crippled of Jordan). He announced in word and deed, the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, that is, of God's long awaited definitive act of salvation.¹⁰ The concept of the Kingdom is more a deep symbol, which N. Perrin calls a 'tensive

⁷ Cf. George Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of Jesus," S. Kuthirakkattel, ed., 2, 3.

⁸ Cf. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Spirit in the Synoptic Gospels," S. Kuthirakkattel, ed., 2, 129.

⁹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁰ Cf. Soares-Prabhu, "The Jesus of Faith: A Christological Contribution to an Ecumenical Third World Spirituality," F. X. D' Sa, ed., 4, 282.

symbol'.¹¹ Jesus consciously made 'Kingdom' as the central symbol of his message. For Jesus, the Kingdom was existential and eschatological at the same time. Indeed to be a follower of Jesus means precisely to share in Jesus' God-experience.

The Gospel narratives indicate that Jesus is more than a prophet and servant. Jesus speaks more than a prophet (because a prophet's address begins with 'Thus says Yahweh'). We can find a special consciousness of authority on the part of Jesus both in the antithesis which set Jesus 'I' against the Law of Moses and also in his statements about why he has come, which express the aim of his mission.¹² Jesus is the exclusive revelation of God, while the prophets are merely pointers to revelation. Jesus speaks of himself as the unique recipient of the revelation of God (Mt 11: 27). 'All things have been delivered to me by my father and no one knows the father except the son and anyone to whom the son chooses to reveal him'. Joachim Jeremias sees that only Jesus can pass on to others the real knowledge of God.¹³ Jesus' mission is the fulfillment of the extension of the Servant's mission to the nations. Jesus is the Son of God and has all the features of the Servant: he is sent, he is obedient, he lives only on God's word, he lays down his life; yet the entire image of the Servant is changed into that of the Son with his unique intimacy with Abba, his Father.¹⁴ In Jesus God opens the salvific significance of suffering and death, beyond the tomb, in a mysterious rehabilitation, says J. Neuner:

Jesus' teaching and message will be forever engraved in the hearts of his followers and interpreted according to the changing times (Jn 14: 26); the Spirit also will continue the prophetic witness in the assembly of the faithful and will make the apostles themselves his prophetic witnesses (Jn 15: 26); this witness of

¹¹ N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 33.

¹² G. Theissen and A. Merz eds., *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 524.

¹³ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, trans, John Bowden, (London: SCM Press, 1981), 42-68.

¹⁴ George Keerenkeri, "Aspects of the Historical Jesus," in *Bible Bashyam* Vol XX no. 3 (September 1994): 176-186.

the Spirit will consist in convincing the world of sin, of righteousness, and of the judgment (Jn 16: 8f). He will also continue the mission of Jesus in revealing the divine mystery (1 Cor 2: 14). This revealing power will at the same time be creative, awakening in the hearts of the believers, because with Jesus and in the Holy Spirit we are allowed to call God our Father, Abba (Rom 8: 15; Gal 4:4).¹⁵

Jesus as a Mystic

Though Jesus was an itinerant charismatic preacher and identifying himself with the poor, despised, lepers, blind and the crippled of Jordan, yet he found quiet moments to be with his *Abba*. He prayed alone (Mt 14: 23), in public (Jn 11: 41-42), before meals (Mt 26: 26) and before important decisions (Lk 6: 12-13). He prayed before healing (Mk 7: 34-35), after healing (Lk 5: 16) and to do the Father's will (Mt 26: 36-44). He also taught on the importance of prayer (Jn 14: 13-14) and taught disciples to pray the 'Our Father' (Lk 11: 2-4). In the morning before heading to Galilee he prayed (Lk 5: 15) and before choosing the twelve disciples he prayed (Mt 11: 25-26). He gave thanks to Father before feeding the multitude (Mk 6: 41) and before walking on water (Mk 6: 46). He prayed before raising Lazarus from the dead (Mt 19: 13-15) and laid hands on children, prayed and blessed them. Jesus prayed at the last supper and in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk 23: 34). He prayed for those who have crucified him: 'Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing' (Mt 27: 46). 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me' (Lk 23: 46): 'Father I commend my spirit in to your hands' (Lk 24: 30). Jesus prayed a blessing at the sea of Tiberius and before ascending to his Father. Jesus sits at the right hand of hand and intercedes for us (Rom 8: 34; Heb 7: 25; 9: 24; 1 Jn 2: 1).

'Silence' is the deeper dimension of being a mystic. We have many images/titles attributed to Jesus but not enough reflection is done on the 'Silent Jesus', - or the 'Silent Christ'. The awe-inspiring silence of Jesus is when the high priest stood up in the Sanhedrin and asked Jesus: 'Have you no answer to make?' But Jesus 'was silent and

¹⁵ J. Neuner, "Jesus: The Christ of Mystical Union or the Prophetic Christ?" in *Religion and Society* (June, 1975): 143f.

made no answer' (Mk 14: 61; Mt 26: 63). Jesus was silent before Herod and Pilate too (Lk 23: 9; Jn 19: 9). Silence is intrinsic to prophecy. 'As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth' (Is 53: 7-8; Acts 8: 32-35). Prophet Elijah witnessed the 'sheer silence of God' on Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19: 12). Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days (silence). Silence opens into contemplation. Jesus contemplated the face of God and in this contemplation only he realized God as a 'loving' Father. In turn, the reflection of the Father's face was seen on Jesus' face.¹⁶ St. Ignatius of Antioch offered a penetrating thought of the 'silence of Christ': '... even the things Jesus has done in silence are worthy of the Father. He that truly possesses the word of Jesus is able also to hearken unto his silence, that he may be perfect: that through his speech he may act and through his silence he may be known' (Eph 15).

Christ's face of silence is the model for Christians. Christian monasticism developed a living tradition of inner silence and stillness. Silence is called the daughter of patience, the mother of watchfulness and attentiveness. Silence is considered as an adoring silence, "a silence, filled with the presence of him who is adored. Silence is a kind of prayer... long-time of silence during the prayer becomes a kind of inner light".¹⁷ Only in contemplation the consecrated disciple experiences the beauty of prophetic Christ. The document of the Congregation for Institutes of the Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ* begins with contemplating the 'Splendour' of the Face of Christ.¹⁸ The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar re-introduced 'splendour' and 'beauty' into Catholic theology – 'seeing the form of Christ'.¹⁹ 'Seeing the face of Christ' is not an intellectual knowledge, but one that comes to the soul pierced

¹⁶ Francis X. Clooney, *His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (California: Standard University Press, 2014), 21-22.

¹⁷ Gabriel Quicke, Light of the East: Insights for the West from Eastern Christianity," in *Chicago Studies*, Vol 53/2 (Summer: 2014): 11.

¹⁸ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20020614_ripartire-da-cristo_en.html, accessed on 04.04.2015.

¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Earthly Beauty and Divine Glory," *Communio* 10/3 (1983): 202.

by the desire of the beauty, silence, goodness and union with God. St. Ignatius would say such a contemplation (placed with Christ) is linked to an election, a choice of definitive way of engaging ourselves in the liberative program of Christ our King (discernment). St. Paul would call, 'exercising conscience' (Acts 24: 16), 'train yourself to be godly' (1 Tim 4: 7). This is what true mysticism/contemplation is. A consecrated disciple is not the one who masters the techniques of prayer but who masters one's conscience (Phil 2: 5-11) which leads to doing the will of God in service (contemplatives in action).

Consecrated Discipleship – "To be placed with Christ"

The ultimate purpose of consecrated discipleship is 'to be placed with Christ': 'the word became flesh' (Jn 1: 14). In *Gaudium et Spes* n. 22, we read: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light". It is not our humanity that explains who Christ is, but it is Christ, through his existence who tells us who man/woman is. So it is not our consecrated discipleship that explains what discipleship is, but it is Christ who tells us what/who a consecrated disciple is. Karl Rahner explains, "Christ and his grace, the reality of God which, in Christ becomes our own reality... For Christ is God's will for our salvation made historical, made flesh... If anything was not assumed, neither was it redeemed... But everything has been assumed into Christ... a reality of Christ in which all human reality is called to God and blessed".²⁰ A consecrated disciple is called to emulate Jesus' life and mission through the evangelical councils (poverty, obedience, chastity). It is a journey toward God, through a process of purification and understanding, as the consecrate disciple rises from the world of senses to the level of the Holy. The life of consecrated discipleship is not merely intellectual and rational narrative, but a hymn of praise and a hymn of service. Pope Francis in his homily on 2nd Feb, 2015 said:

Christ became 'like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest' (*Heb* 2:17). Jesus *descended*, he became like us, in order then to *ascend* with

²⁰ Karl Rahner, *Mission and Grace. Essays in Pastoral Theology, II* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 39-42.

us to the Father, making us like himself. In our heart we can contemplate this double movement by imagining the Gospel scene of Mary who enters the Temple holding the Child in her arms.

The Mother walks, yet it is the Child who *goes before her*. She carries him, yet *he is leading her* along the path of the God who comes to us so that we might go to him. Jesus walked the same path as we do, and showed us a new way, the 'new and living way' (cf. *Heb 10:20*) which is himself. *For us too, as consecrated men and women, he opened a path.*²¹

Being touched by the loving hands of Jesus, opens me to the realization that I am loved and accepted, and disposes me for the experience of my salvation. Consecrated discipleship is an invitation to move beyond being touched by the love of God to investing in a relationship of intimacy with Jesus. And since intimacy is always an invitation to love more, the disciple of Jesus is open to wherever this relationship will take her/him. Love offered and received creates in me the energy to reciprocate in love. This is 'service out of love.'²² 'Love consists in mutual sharing,' and 'manifests itself in deeds,' (Sp.Ex. 230,231). It is in 'mutual sharing', mutual involvement and becoming part of another that brings about love. Deeds do not necessarily create love, but if there is love then deeds will spontaneously follow. One must not equate service with love, for we can also serve out of fear, or out of guilt, or from a sense of duty. But it is 'service out of love' that is a fitting response to love, much more to a God who is love. It is only 'service out of love' that generates life. In the washing of the feet Jesus makes us aware that 'service out of love' is the way of life of the disciple of Jesus, i.e. service as an expression of giving oneself.

For example, St. Ignatius of Loyola expresses a fundamental spiritual experience of his faith and his life as: 'To be placed with Christ'²³ in everyday mysticism of life of experiencing God. God touches us in everyday lives. In Spiritual Exercises, it will be to ask "for an intimate

²¹http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/02/02/pope_francis_opens_year_for_consecrated_life_homily/1121188, accessed on 05. 04.2015.

²² Aloysius Pieris, *Mysticism of Service* (Tulana: Logos Printing (Pvt) Ltd, 2000), 79.

²³ Cf. P. R. Divarkar, *Placed with Christ: The Making of an Apostle* (Rome: CIS, 1977), 5.

knowledge of our Lord, who has become human for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely..." and to ask for the grace "an intimate knowledge of the many blessings received, that filled with gratitude for all, I may in all things love and serve the Divine majesty".²⁴ In other words, the mystical experience of finding God in all things is the foundation for Ignatius' understanding of the discernment of spirits. In grace, we are not only drawn into God's love and life, we are drawn into God's action in this world. This is 'a 'service (prophetic) mysticism'. One is called to be a companion of Jesus in mission: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What must I do for Christ?²⁵ It is a question of enduring and withstanding the cross – or put it in more everyday terms, tensions, confrontations, pains, struggle, confusion, opposition. The cross has a name, the name of Jesus.²⁶ The humanity of Christ is the abiding medium in which the Spirit transforms our sensibility and desire for God.

Hugo Rahner holds that, Ignatius besides his Manresean experience, he also drew inspiration from St. Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius of Loyola was familiar with Ignatius of Antioch from the pages of *The Golden Legend*: 'My Love is Crucified'. Love is true love when it is a crucified love; inspiration is true inspiration when it is measured by the humanity of Christ. This principle is basic to the discernment of spirits in primitive Christianity as it was formulated by Ignatius of Antioch.²⁷ He also said, "Jesus Christ as the ground for hoping that all of humanity may be converted and win their way to God".²⁸ Perhaps, Mahatma Gandhi understood the deeper meaning of the phrase 'My Love is Crucified'. He says, the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross was a supreme example of self-giving: "One such act of perfect sacrifice would suffice for the whole world. Such is held to be Jesus' example."²⁹ Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

²⁴ *Spiritual Exercises*, 104 & 233.

²⁵ *Spiritual Exercises*, 53.

²⁶ W. Lambert, *Directions for Communication* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2001), 30.

²⁷ Cf. H. Rahner, *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola: An Account of Its Historical Development* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1980), 60.

²⁸ John R. Wills, *The Teachings of the Church Fathers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 146.

²⁹ M. K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), 42.

said, "Jesus and love are synonymous. If you say love, you need not say Jesus. If you say Jesus that means love."³⁰

Consecrated disciples are invited to share this love in service through the evangelical counsels. The document *Perefectae Caritatis* (Oct 28, 1965) highlighted "the great value of a life, consecrated by the profession of the counsels," and insisted that "the manner of living, praying and working should be suitably adapted everywhere, especially in the mission territories, to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the members and also, as required by the nature of each institute, to the necessities of the apostolate, the demands of culture, and social and economic circumstances".³¹ Referring to the charismatic dimension of the Church we can say that all this sheds a light on the gifts of Consecrated Life and the gifts of the Founders of the Religious Families: "The very gifts given by the Spirit are willed precisely by Christ and are of their nature directed to the contexture of the Body in order to vivify its functions and activities" (*MutuaeRelationes*, n. 5). The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* uses an image to present the various forms: "They can be compared to a plant with many branches which sinks its roots into the Gospel and brings forth abundant fruit in every season of the Church's life" (n. 5).

Today we need to have a relook at the way the evangelical counsels are understood and practiced. Consecrated disciples must be aware that the evangelical counsels are effective tools in witnessing and following Christ.³² Francis Cardinal Arinze said: The consecrated life is an embracing of the call to radical discipleship, the call to follow Christ in a radical way, because the consecrated person takes the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. The life of Jesus was a model of the three virtues lived to an extraordinary degree of commitment. All followers of Christ are indeed called to live three virtues, but not in

S. S. Ravishankar, *Wisdom for the New Millennium* (Hyderabad: Jaico Publishing House, 2006), 113.

As Quoted in Vimala Cheginimattam, "Impact of Vatican II on Religious Life," in *Vinyasa*, Vol. IX, No. 2 (2014): 26.

Joseph Xavier, "Call to Evangelical Counsels," in *VJ TR* Vol. 79, No. 4 (2015): 13.

the same way. Consecrated people live the three virtues as vows binding them for their whole lives.³³ Obedience is not submissiveness, passivity and conformity but obedience has to be lived in sharing, dialogue and meaningful participation and the practice of co-responsibility towards the mission of Jesus.³⁴ Obedience is a discerned love. Poverty is to imitate Jesus the poor who became poor for us on the onslaught of injustice, discrimination, exploitation and oppression and participated in the Galilean people's movement. Being poor materially (detachment) is prerequisite for the kingdom of fellowship. Chastity is a way of living out the resurrection (love) in daily life. A consecrated disciple places these evangelical councils at the disposal of the church (the body of Christ) in total service. Ignatius of Loyola, in his first draft of the constitutions of the Company of Jesus, insisted on a sincere commitment to a life of the apostolic community, rather than the three vows.³⁵ Consecrated disciples build the church through a vowed life. It is a filial 'theo-drama' played out in the ordinariness of life of vowed person. Raimondo Schwager claims that St. Ignatius's approach towards the Church can be described as 'dramatic':

Union with the Church is something to be sought by working through all the prejudices, affective limitations and sinfulness of individual Christians and of representatives of the Church.... Union with the Church takes place in human encounter... where the various phases of a drama can be played out: ...development, conflict, tension, crisis, catastrophe, and final reconciliation and denouement. Ignatius's actual experience of the Church then seems best interpreted as an encouragement to take part in this drama.³⁶

³³ http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/3734/cardinal_francis_arinze_on_radical_discipleship_and_the_consecrated_life.aspx accessed on 10.04.2015.

³⁴ Xavier E. Manavath, "Re-visioning Evangelical councils: 50 Years after Vatican II," in *Sanyasa*, Vol. IX, No. 2 (2014): 44-46.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁶ Raymond Schwager, *Das dramatische Kirchenverständnis bei Ignatius von Loyola* (Zurich. 1970), as quoted in Philip Endean, "Ignatius and Church Authority," *Ignatian Horizons* 1491-1991, *The Way*, Supplement 70 (Spring, 1991), 89.

Consecrated Discipleship in the Indian context

I would like to point to four areas where the consecrated disciples in India ought to widen, sharpen and deepen their apostolic (prophetic and mystic) commitment:

First, witness of life

We live in a globalized world and we face many challenges. The credible way of living out our consecrated discipleship in India is to bear 'witness to an authentic religious life'. The prophet is not someone with exclusive knowledge but someone called to make people aware. The prophet presents a vision by embodying it and calls for conversion and transformation. It was articulated by Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "Modern man (woman) listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (n. 41). The 'witnessing' aspect is closely linked to a 'personal God experience' and 'contact with the poor'. It is in the faces of the poor we see the face of our God. It is in discovering the heart of the poor we discover the heart of Christ. As St. Augustine said: "Christ is poor on earth in the person of his poor..."³⁷ Consecrated disciples enhance the church as a prophetic and mystic 'movement' provided they are ready to listen to the radical call of the Gospel. Then the church becomes a powerful source of the spiritual and social Jesus' movement.

Second, experience of God

In 2006, Subhasis Chattopadhyaya, a Hindu, wrote in *Jivan*, a Jesuit monthly: "The Jesuits are doing good work; they speak of the option for the poor' and often act on it, but what we want are living symbols of the love of God for humans, for us, secular Indians. Help us to become ablaze with the splendor of God and we will bear witness to Christ".³⁸ Are the consecrated disciples working in India ready to listen to people of other faiths? How many of us sincerely visit temples, mosques and viharas? How many of us partake in inter-religious

³⁷ St. Augustine, Sermon 123, 3-4; PL 38, 685-686.

³⁸ Subhasis Chattopadhyaya, "What a Hindu expects from Jesuits," in *Jivan* (September: 2006): 27.

prayers? Is there willingness on our part to become inter-religious and inter-cultural in our approaches? India is a land of many religions. In Indian context, the call or mission to witness to my own experience of God need not prevent me from recognizing the God-experience of others.³⁹ It imposes on me the difficult task of coming to terms with both other experiences and of becoming aware of the specific contribution that my own experience has to make in such a situation. In any case a consecrated disciple can be sure that s/he has been sent, like Christ, to serve others, not to dominate them; to gather all things leading them to fullness (in the Absolute), not to scatter; to integrate rather than to destroy. While committing ourselves fully to the person of Christ and to his mission, it is still possible to be open to listen to the spiritual Gurus of other faiths which only help us to enhance our faith.⁴⁰

Third, the sadness of silence

I was moved with compassion when I read the column by Shiv Vishvanathan which appeared in The Hindu newspaper (March 7, 2015):

India is a society where the poor, the nomad and the abandoned are waiting for someone to discover their silence... My driver, a folk authority on Delhi, told me that there are hundreds of old people like this across Delhi. Their families don't want them. They feel unloved. After a meagre breakfast, they leave home and spend the day sitting on pavements, watching people, tired with expectation and hope. Their eyes speak speechlessly. There are no tears. They watch with innocence. The driver said, "I hate red lights in a city. They remind me of the homeless, the beggars, the old. It is a stop for all the people we abandon and forget." He uttered an obscenity which described the attitude of the city, a heartlessness which had no place for the defeated.⁴¹

³⁹ Michael Amaladoss, *Beyond Dialogue: Pilgrims to the Absolute* (Bangalore: ATC Publications, 2008), 144f.

⁴⁰ Thomas D'Sa, "Mysticism for Prophetic Mission," in *Sanyasa*, Vol II, No. 2 (2007): 184.

⁴¹ <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-sadness-of-silence/article6966883.ece>, accessed on 05.04.2015.

I am afraid that increasingly most of our religious houses situated in the heart of major cities reflect our 'heartlessness' to the poor, beggars and homeless. Some of the religious men and women think that this is the work of the 'Missionaries of Charity'. It is true that they MCs live out the prophetic and mystic dimension of the consecrated life by their special charism but the question remains what about the responsibility of the other consecrated disciples. In some places, religious superiors are spending too much of their time thinking about fund-raising and management.⁴² What is the use of constructing costly religious houses and churches in India when much of our population are under the poverty line? Many farmers across the country are committing suicide due to crop failure and inability to pay back bank loans. As consecrated disciples we own many educational institutions in India and what are they for? Some of them accumulate reckless bank deposits too, for what? Parappally holds: "We claim to carry the burden of the people when we conduct excellent schools and colleges, well-equipped hospitals and other institutions. But do these institutions carry the burden of life for the poor and marginalized in our society".⁴³ Recall the words of St. John Chrysostum:

Would you honour the Body of Christ? Do not despise his nakedness; do not honour him here in church clothed in silk vestments and then pass him by unclothed and frozen. Remember that he who said, "This is my body" also said: "You saw me hungry and gave me no food", and 'in as far as you did it not, you did it not to me'. In the first sense the body of Christ does not need clothing but worship from a pure heart. In the second, it does need clothing and all the care we can give it...

What is the use of loading the Lord's table with gold cups while he himself is starving? Feed the hungry, then if you have any money left over, spend it on the altar table. Would you make a cup of gold and withhold a cup of water? What use is it to adorn the altar with cloth of gold hangings and deny Christ a coat for his

⁴² George Weigel, "Pope Francis: On a Mission to the World," In *Tablet* (March 2015): 13.

⁴³ Jacob Parappally, *Way of the Cross for Today*, (Bangalore: SFS/ATC Publications, 2014), 14.

back? What would that profit you? Tell me: if you saw someone starving and refused to give him any food but instead spent your money on adoring the altar with gold, would he thank you? Or if you saw someone in rags and stiff with cold, and then did not give him clothing but set up golden columns in his honour, would he not say he was being made a fool of and insulted?⁴⁴

As consecrated disciples do we encounter pain, anxiety, despair, hatred, injustice and inequality, on the one hand; and love, goodness, peace and beauty on the other? In this same realm of thinking Sebastian Kappen sees Jesus as the prophet of the new humanity. Jesus stands as a unique prophet in humankind's hope for the fullness of freedom and love.⁴⁵ It is his mission as a prophet that is of particular relevance for us today in the Indian context. When we revolt against whatever is dehumanising and commit ourselves to the construction of a worthier future for human we are doing what the prophets did of old.⁴⁶ In the document of FABC we read: "To be prophetic is to denounce injustice the renewed evangelizer announces the love of God, 'the weightier matters of the law' which are justice, mercy and faith (Mt 23:23), and Jesus' preferential love of the poor".⁴⁷

Fourth, the mammon of Hindutva

In recent years there has been much debate in national newspapers and in academic circles on the ideology and practice of Hindutva. It has brought to light the economic, political and religious roots of the movement. We are aware that the Hindutva agenda of the ruling dispensation is weakening, even destroying, the secular fabric of the Indian polity and polarizing the communities on religious lines. What is the response of the consecrated disciple or the Indian Christian citizen in this particular conflictual situation? St. Augustine emphasized the fundamental meaning of justice for a political system: "If justice is set

⁴⁴ St. John Chrysostom, Hom. 50, 3-4, *The Divine Office*, Week 21 of the Year, Saturday.

⁴⁵ Sebastian Kappen, "The Prophet of Hope," in *Selected Writings of Sebastian Kappen, Jesus and Society Vol II*, ed. Sebastian Painadath (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 5.

⁴⁶ Sebastian Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom* (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1977), 54.

⁴⁷ James H. Kroeger, "FABC: Asia Urgently Needs Renewed Evangelizers," in *Sedos Bulletin* Vol 45/1 & 2 (Jan-Feb, 2013): 31.

aside, then, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers? For what are bands of robbers but little kingdoms. The band itself is made up of men, which is ruled by the authority of a ringleader, is knit together by a pact of confederacy, and divides the booty according to a firm agreement among them".⁴⁸

The Sangh Parivar is a band of misguided people who promote a pseudo-hindu kingdom based on Hindutva ideology by systematically subverting the secular fabric of India and perverting the justice for the poor. I strongly believe that the Church in India (consecrated disciples) has resources and strength to take on the forces of Hindutva. We are not against the individuals but what we need to oppose is the ideology on which Hindutva is based. Our approach will be based on the Jesus' prophetic-mystic values. Protests, *dharmas*, rallies and peoples movements are part and parcel of radical discipleship. It is a new way of being religious. Pope Francis wanted more faithful imitation of Christ: "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 49).

Conclusion

In conclusion I may say that the consecrated disciples have an important place in today's church in India and the world. Consecrated disciples need to live out as Pope Francis wished: "Have the courage to be present in the midst of conflict and tension, as a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit.... Live the mysticism of encounter, which entails the ability to hear, to listen... to seek together.... find ways to create 'alternate spaces' where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive"(2nd Feb, 2015). We need to be creative disciples of Jesus and to be agents of change in the world. We are called to become 'prophetic mystics with open eyes'.

Vidyajyoti, College of Theology
23, Raj Niwas Marg, Delhi – 54
prjohnsj@gmail.com

⁴⁸ As Quoted in Walter Cardinal Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (trans.) by William Madges (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 182.

Consecrated Life as Counter-Culture: Historical Impulses for Its Reinvention Today

Isaac Padinjarekuttu

How many consecrated persons and communities of religious today are truly eschatological signs of the Reign of God? In the first place, questions can be raised about the origin of religious itself in the Church. What influenced some to follow a radical way of following Jesus? The history of the development consecrated religious life shows that this radical way of living Christian faith and witness needs to be re-invented and renewed from time to time because the culture and the ways of life it challenges are changing. In the context of the present crisis in consecrated life many questions are raised about its relevance and function in the Church: give up marriage, abandon family, friends and society, and move into the desert maintaining that they were serving God by doing that? Neither Jesus nor the apostles lived a secluded life. Paul admonished Christians to pray at all times, but he did not tell them to retire to the desert. But the hermits, monks and nuns insisted that their way life was the perfect way of following. Why did it take three centuries for the perfect way of following Jesus to evolve in the Church, if that was what Jesus intended? Did the pre-Christian life of ascetism influence the emergence of religious life? Was it a reaction to the institutionalization of a radical movement for the transformation of the society into the Kingdom of God by Jesus? The author of this article, Prof. Dr. Isaac Padinjarekuttu shows that the origin of consecrated life in the Church as a counter-cultural movement to follow Jesus radically will have its relevance till the end of time provided the consecrated people understand and live the implications of this way of life in dialogue with the postmodern, globalized world of the twenty-first century. Prof. Dr Isaac Padinjarekuttu is a priest

of the Diocese of Kohima, Nagaland. Presently he is Dean and Professor of Church History at Oriens Theological College, Shillong, Meghalaya. He has published edited seven books and written more than hundred articles on theology, church history, spirituality, etc.

Introduction

Consecrated life in the Church began as a countercultural movement. It is its basic nature and in its history it has often demonstrated its ability to be so. This article is an attempt to retrieve some of those examples from history with a view to motivate consecrated men and women of today to challenge existing systems and structures in Church and society and offer a more Gospel oriented vision of the world. The significance of consecrated life lay in the fact, that men and women were ready to listen to the radical call of the Gospel in their varied contexts, thus bringing about a decisive dynamism in the Church of their times. If the charismatic function of consecrated life is to remain alive in the Church, consecrated men and women must once again present themselves as persons who have been freed by the power of the Gospel and have personally glimpsed meaning in the midst of a fractured world, like Anthony of Egypt, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila and many others.

1. Monasticism as Counterculture

The words of the gospel that moved Anthony of Egypt, who is considered to be the founder of Christian monasticism, the forerunner of all forms of consecrated life, to retire to the desert were: "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me"¹ This is a call to radical discipleship. But even before Anthony there were men and women who had freely chosen the life of renunciation including marriage in the Christian communities of the early Church. This idealism was nourished also by the expectation of the imminent second coming of Christ. Did not Paul say: "The appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who buy as though they had no

¹ Mt 19:21.

goods, and who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away.”² In the first three centuries these ascetics belonged to two major groups: wandering ascetics and community ascetics. The first were itinerant preachers and missionaries, after the model of the missionaries of the Gospels.³ The community ascetics lived in the community constituting its spiritual core. Women were an integral part of this movement, especially, widows and virgins. In fact, the widows constituted the first group of consecrated persons recognized and institutionalized by the early Church.⁴ The virgins were those who took the vow of chastity following Jesus’ call to virginity for the sake of the Kingdom.⁵ From the middle of the third century there began in Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor the movement of these ascetics into the desert and here the influence of Anthony of Egypt seems to have been decisive. When they formed communities there emerged the first monasteries proper, initiated by another Egyptian, Pachomius.

Why did these Christians give up marriage, abandon family, friends and society, and move into the desert maintaining that they were serving God by doing that? Of course Jesus had said any one who preferred father or mother, son or daughter was unworthy of him.”⁶ But neither Jesus nor the apostles lived a secluded life. Paul admonished Christians to pray at all times,⁷ but he did not tell them to retire to the desert. But the hermits, monks and nuns insisted that their way life was the perfect way of following Jesus, although from his own life they could show little to prove it. Moreover, we could ask: why did it take three centuries for the perfect way of following Jesus to evolve in the Church, if that was what Jesus intended? The answer lies in the undisputable fact that they were influenced by pre-Christian asceticism. Long before Christianity, cultures and religions of the world had practised asceticism. Greek philosophy, Judaism and Indian religions, like Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism, valued asceticism. Christianity, too, had texts which called for radical renunciation as an expression of faith in the Kingdom of God and of following of Christ. John the Baptist led an ascetic life

² 1 Cor 7:31.

⁴ Cfr. 1 Tim 5:3-12.

⁶ Mt 10:37.

³ For example, Lk 10:1-12.

⁵ Mt 19:12.

⁷ 1 Thess 5:17.

style,⁸ and Jesus was in the desert before his public ministry.⁹ Jesus invited his disciples to leave everything and follow him,¹⁰ which had its rewards.¹¹ Jesus' devastating answer to the rich young man to renounce everything and follow him¹² came to be seen as a personal invitation by many ascetics. The renunciation demanded from the missionaries in the mission commands,¹³ and the conditions for following Christ¹⁴ pointed to a life of hardship and suffering. Paul advocated celibacy for the sake of the Gospel.¹⁵ It is also a special vocation. "Let anyone accept this who can"¹⁶ and "by human resources, he told them, this is impossible; but for God everything is possible."¹⁷ We can also add two other factors that contributed to the emergence of the movement. The first was the end of persecutions and the mass conversions to Christianity. Many felt that the subsequent institutionalization of the Church led to a superficial Christianity and fervent Christians felt compelled to retire to solitude to distance themselves from the worldly Church. Secondly, the Church Father Origen's mystical theology praised asceticism and even claimed that it was an alternative form of martyrdom. As the persecutions ended, there was little chance for Christians to suffer the martyr's death and so through monasticism one could attain its benefits. Thus the two Egyptians Anthony and Pachomius made family and community asceticism into a new form of life in the Church which came to be accepted as a more perfect and radical form of following Christ.

According to John Cassian, the ascetic ideal is best expressed in the Christian community of Jerusalem as depicted in the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁸ This, according to Cassian, was real Christianity, Christianity without compromises; everything else is Christianity at a "discounted price," a Christianity of concessions and compromises. Therefore, the monastic life is the real and original form of Christian life. Many later

⁸ Mt 3:1-4.

⁹ Mt 4:1-2.

¹⁰ Celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God in Mt 19:10-12.

¹¹ Mt 19:29.

¹² Mt 19,16-22.

¹³ Mt 10, and Lk 10.

¹⁴ Mt 16:24 and Lk 9:23ff.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 7.

¹⁶ Mt 19:12.

¹⁷ Mt 19:26.

¹⁸ *De Institutis Coenobiorum*, VII, 17ff.; Acts 2:42-44 and 4:32-34.

monastic writers accepted Cassian's view and began to see in it the radicality of the Christian faith as opposed to the laxity that had crept into the Church with the increase in the number of Christians. More importantly, the Church began to foster it because it considered it to be an expression of genuine Christian spirituality. The support of the Church, however, created a danger, namely, the preferential treatment given to these people in the Church, as if they belonged to a separate class altogether. This begins already with the Church Fathers extolling them and their virtues. Cyprian of Carthage called the ascetics the blossoms of the Mother Church. He interpreted the Parable of the Sower¹⁹ in such a way that hundred fold fruit was produced by the martyrs, sixty fold by the virgins, and thirty fold by the married people.²⁰ For Jerome, the virgins produced hundred fold fruit, the widows sixty, and the married people thirty. This was indeed an endangering of the Christian ideal through asceticism by introducing division in the community of the Church. Against this too there were critical voices. Ignatius of Antioch warned the celibate to consider his vocation as giving glory to God and not to himself. If he prided himself in his works or put himself above the bishop he should be condemned.²¹ Two things were particularly demanded from the ascetics: humility and submission to the authority of the Church (bishop). Humility recognizes that his call is a grace and a charism, not based on personal merit. Benedict would call humility the chief virtue of the monk. Secondly, respect for the authority of the Church, especially the bishop, was an expression of humility because in the early Church bishops were often married. It demanded real humility from the part of the celibate monk to respect the bishop. The Rules of monasticism of the early Church were attempts to help the monks to go back to the Gospel ideal of asceticism, to show that the call to asceticism is a grace, and not an opportunity to show oneself off.

Thus monasticism, from the beginning, had an anti-institutional and anti-hierarchical slant. It was a protest movement against the softening of the moral fiber of Christianity after Constantine gave freedom to

¹⁹ Mat 13:4-23.

²⁰ *De Habitu Virginum*, 21-23.

²¹ *Letter to Polycarp*, 5,2.

the Church, according to Adolf Harnack.²² John Cassian warned that the monk ought to flee from women and bishops.²³ That the monks ought to flee from women is easily understandable. But why from bishops? It is a warning that monks should not succumb to the temptation of seeking clerical office, not because he is against the authority of the bishop, but out of humility and a desire to bring spiritual help to others. It was a warning to prevent the domestication of monasticism. Neither Cassian himself nor the monks of later times could keep this rule.

As it has happened often in the history of the Church, the countercultural movement soon became the heart of culture. Monasticism, which began as a radical movement of withdrawal from the world evolved into a powerful institution in the Church, enjoying royal patronage and enormous appeal for the nobility. Thus there began the control by the laity through endowments. The uncontrolled lay power demoralized many monasteries and monastic observance simply collapsed. By the tenth century, clericalization of monasticism was also complete which was not foreseen in the monastic rules. The Reforms of Cluny, the founding of the Cistercian Order, etc. were attempts to rediscover the Benedictine ideal but in reality they achieved little.

2. Critique of Monastic Wealth:

Poverty Movements and Mendicancy

By the 12th century, there was a new ferment in society, which came mostly from lay people, who began to criticize this so-called "life of perfection," as monastic life was then known. The first point was the wealth and privileges that they enjoyed in the feudal society. The chief area of criticism was poverty. The critics said that poverty was not merely personal but should be seen also as communitarian, because by now, communitarian poverty was a myth. The community possessed everything and austerity was nowhere to be seen. Life in the monastery was far better than life outside. So there was a call for real poverty.

²² Adolf von Harnack, *Das Mönchtum, seine Ideale und seine Geschichte*, Giessen, 1921, 24.

²³ *De Institutis Coenobiorum*, XI 18.

Secondly, they attacked another aspect of monasticism, stability and security, and advocated wandering preaching for which poverty was an essential condition. With possessions one could not wander about preaching. The example they put forward was that of Jesus with his apostles going about preaching, Jesus who had no place to lay his head. This new way of life was called the *vita apostolica*, the apostolic life. This was now demanded from monks. Various groups of both men and women emerged, sometimes also of monks and priests, who wanted to practise the *vita apostolica*, after the example of Jesus and the apostles. Such movements increased in number in the twelfth century and came to be called "Poverty Movements". They all wanted to live the radical life of the Gospel, "naked following the naked Christ" (*nudus nudum Christum sequi*), a saying of Jerome, but which became the slogan of many movements of the Middle Ages. Some of them had unorthodox doctrines and were declared heretics.

Two of these movements, in many ways anticipated the Mendicant Orders, the Waldenses and the Humiliati. The Waldenses were founded by Peter Valdes, a wealthy cloth merchant and banker of Lyons. Following the Gospel call, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor," he experienced a conversion, abandoned everything and embarked upon a career of itinerant preaching, supporting himself by begging. Suspected of heresy, he was called before a synod at Lyons in 1181 where he professed the orthodox faith; but his followers, called the "Poor Men of Lyons," in the face of increasing clerical hostility, drifted into an anticlerical and anti-hierarchical stance; they were condemned at a synod in 1184 by Pope Lucius. The Humiliati who were active in Italy, were a religious fraternity consisting of priests and literate lay people, dedicated to the new apostolic life. They engaged in preaching which was a breach of sacerdotal professionalism, and the hierarchy found in it a subversion of authority and therefore, heresy. They, too, were condemned by Pope Lucius in 1184.

This was the scene into which the Mendicant Orders were born. They, in fact, grew out of them, but created a totally new concept of discipleship of Jesus in the Church, and a radical break away from the monastic tradition of the past. By adopting the rule of individual and corporate poverty and refusing to accept endowments or to own

property and by deciding to live by begging, they discarded things that had long been regarded as indispensable to any organized community of monks. They also broke free from another important principle of traditional monasticism by abandoning seclusion and enclosure to engage in active pastoral work. The message was clear. Salvation need no longer be sought by flight from the world nor is it reserved to a spiritual elite. The demands of Christian life could be fulfilled by sanctifying the humdrum duties and tasks of everyday life. All that was needed was that they repent and receive the Gospel.

Both Dominic and Francis of Assisi held on to these ideals without compromise, particularly, the ideal of radical poverty, personal and corporate. Francis of Assisi embodied this radicality more visibly than Dominic. Basing himself on gospel texts about apostolic poverty and wandering mission,²⁴ Francis challenged the Church of his time and even made his poverty movement acceptable in the Church.

Although there were many "poverty movements," the nature of Francis' poverty was special. It was a literal imitation of the earthly life of Christ as depicted by the Gospels. "The brothers shall appropriate nothing to themselves, neither a place nor anything; but as pilgrims and strangers in this world, in poverty and humility serving God, they shall with confidence go seeking alms. Nor need they be ashamed, for the Lord made himself poor for us in this world."²⁵ For Francis, poverty was not an end in itself nor a missionary expedience, but was a means of literally following and imitating Jesus who had nowhere to lay his head. It was the life according to the Gospel. It was emptying oneself radically, standing naked before God and following him ("naked following the naked Christ"). But poverty was not only material but also spiritual. It is an attitude of complete dependence on God. With empty hands we should stand before God; otherwise we are dependent on our own resources. Only radical poverty makes people love God without conditions. Only then will man understand the meaning of the cross of Christ. Poverty is also the sign of human solidarity. Possessions create social rivalry and erect boundaries between human beings. For

²⁴ Mat 10:7-19.

²⁵ Lawrence C.H., *Medieval Monasticism*, London, 1993, 247.

Francis, the first and most important condition for following Christ is poverty. Undoubtedly, the message had a wide appeal in the society and the mendicants had large followings of men and women, rich and poor, educated and illiterate.

3. Critique of Exclusion of Women: the Beguines

Although women were integral part of the monastic and mendicant movements from the beginning, the Church was always wary of treating them with equality and dignity. The separation of men's and women's establishments was one of the cornerstones of legislations in the Middle Ages. The next stage was to bring them under episcopal supervision. The understanding was that uncontrolled virginity was as dangerous as uncontrolled sexuality. Therefore, the authorities thought that it was necessary to control the convents of women more than the houses of men. Their freedom was unduly curtailed. This was behind the cloister, one of the notorious institutions imposed upon women by the Church. In 1298, Boniface VIII, in his bull *Periculoso*, decreed that all religious women everywhere must be cloistered. He stressed the peril of men's inability to resist women, and women's natural inability to refrain from tempting men. The restriction remained in force for centuries, in fact, officially till 1901.

The cloister was a strict enclosure. They were not allowed to go out except in times of fire and pest. There was no possibility for them of doing any social work outside the nunnery. If they wanted to serve humanity, they had to establish the structures inside, for example, schools for girls. But not all women were ready to surrender their rights so easily, and their enthusiasm inspired new movements. Some women passionately embraced a new form of religious life involving charity, contemplation and mysticism. That is the story of the Beguines.

The origins of the Beguines are somewhat complex. No one is sure even about the origin of the name, Beguines. The word *beghina* first came into use at the end of the twelfth century, and much speculation has occurred as to its origin. Some have suggested that it may derive from the verb to "beg" or from the "begging orders" or from the Albigenses, referring to a group of heretics of the time. Others have proposed that the name points to the gray-coloured clothes these pious

women used to wear (beige); or that it was a nickname derived from the Middle Dutch word *bagga*, meaning wearing thick clothes. Others connect the name to Lambert de Begue, who played a great role in the organization of these women in its initial stages.²⁶

The Beguines were groups of laywomen living in the towns of northern Europe, who came together to practise a new form of religious life. They were not affiliated to any religious order nor did they follow any recognized monastic Rule. The movement was probably a response to the social exclusiveness of most convents and their formalism and affluence. Its piety was rooted in the cult of voluntary poverty and the current ideal of apostolic life. They were fired by the ideal of an uncomplicated Christian lay life, which was evangelical, imitating the life of Christ.

They were devout women living in the world, who used the town Church as a focus for their activities and engaged in works of charity. Then they began forming communities and living together. They took no vows but made an engagement to observe celibacy while they lived in the community. A condition of membership was the renunciation of personal property and a simple life style. They attended mass and the canonical hours in the parish Church. They supported themselves by their own work, like weaving, sewing, embroidery, etc. and moved around freely, serving the needs of the poor and the sick. Some resorted to organized begging as a means of support.

The movement spread fast with many members, and Beguinages sprang up in many places because the Beguines offered an alternative life style with relative amount of freedom. But that was not the only cause of the success of the Beguines. They were, in fact, challenging the religious climate of the day, and the oppressive and misogynic structures of the Church. But soon there were criticisms from the

See Philip Sheldrake, "Context and Conflicts: The Beguines," in his *Spirituality and History* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 133-59; Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 24-49; Ursula King, *Christian Mystics*, (Mahwah, New Jersey: HiddenSpring, 2001), 3-104; "Beginen/Begarden in *Theologische Realenzyklopaedie*, Studienausgabe Teil Band V, (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 404-11; "Beguines and Beghards" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, second edition, 2003.

clergy and the laity. The spectacle of laywomen without sanction of any religious order engaging in active apostolic role was offensive both to male chauvinism and clerical pride. From the first day, they were suspected of heresy although for the most part, they were neither heretical nor anticlerical. Their individualistic and affective piety aroused the misgivings. The mystical experiences and direct illumination ascribed to some Beguines were seen as posing a threat to the hierarchical organization of divine grace. It was another expression of the chronic conflict between institution and charism. Thus criticism focused upon the lack of inlaustration, clerical supervision and female mendicancy. The Council of Vienne in 1312 censured the way of certain women commonly called Beguines, who lose themselves in foolish speculations on the Trinity and the divine essence. These women promised obedience to nobody and they neither renounced their property nor professed any approved Rule. Their way of life was to be permanently forbidden.²⁷

It is one of the first movements of women's liberation, offering women greater freedom than in a convent or in a lay household. Looked at peripherally it was one of the movements of the *vita apostolica*, but going deeper, we find that it was one of those early attempts by women to gain a foothold in the Church with their freedom and rights acknowledged and respected. Their struggle concerned not only the role of women in the Church but also wider issues, such as the place of the laity in the Church, the nature of monastic life, especially as it was interpreted for women, and the nature of Christian life in general. It was a conscious movement of women for freedom and active participation in the life of the Church, which was their right but was denied to them. It needed courage to challenge a system like the medieval Church which confined the lives of millions of women to the inner recesses of the home or to the walls of a monastery, and to seek alternatives with flexibility and informality. They are the forerunners of thousands of modern day women religious who effectively combine prayer with social service. They remain an inspiration to all women in all generations who want to develop a spirituality in tune with the needs of their times.

²⁷ Norman Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol I, Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990, 374.

4. Challenge of the Reformation: Active Apostolate

The Reformation was born into a world of anti-clericalism and animosity towards monastic and religious life. In an age marked by openness to the secular and human values, the monks and nuns seemed to belong to the “dark ages.” Erasmus of Rotterdam was a very sharp critic of monastic and religious life and was a herald of things to come during the Enlightenment. He accused the monks, nuns and other religious of being enemies of culture and education, who encouraged obscurantism, narrow-mindedness and enmity towards the world. The Reformers added a theological reason to it saying that it was against the doctrine of Justification by Faith. Monasticism and religious life seemed to lay too much emphasis on human effort, and not on God’s grace. They also argued that it is devaluing the sacrament of baptism by which all Christians are made equal. They also objected to the vows, which although taken freely, were again means for gaining merits by doing something more than the others, and thus encouraging religious self-realization through personal efforts.

It challenged the Church to be creative in adapting to the new situation. The period after the Reformation saw the founding of a number of new congregations and orders whose spirituality was strongly stamped by active apostolate, pastoral care, education, charitable activities, and mission, and for the first time, women were an integral part of the movement. That was the answer to the criticism of turning away from the world, although the mendicants had already laid the foundation for it. We shall look at two examples.

The first was the Society of Jesus founded by Ignatius of Loyola. The spirituality of the Society of Jesus is summed up in the Spiritual Exercises the core of which was the glory of God in the discipleship of the poor and crucified Jesus. This discipleship has an ecclesiological dimension, that is, the readiness to serve him within the visible Church. In this context was the fourth vow of obedience to the Pope to be understood, which was readiness for apostolic mission on behalf of the Pope anywhere, any time. The basic and pivotal concept of life as a Jesuit was not the classical coenobitic ideal of the Christian community of Acts of the Apostles, but the concept of apostolic mission. With this, religious life was given a still new orientation and meaning. And because

of that, certain characteristics which were essential for religious life till then were abandoned, and others introduced. More than the community, the individual is emphasized. Some community activities are abandoned, like prayer in choir, a distinctive habit, etc. There were no prescribed penitential practices or common prayer or other practices of piety. Another thing which was important for the Jesuits was the constitutionally directed centralism which was necessary for efficiency at the service of the Church. Instead of the common rules for the community, individual guidance is important, according to the situation, and hence, the great role of guidance by superiors. Thus, the specialty of the Jesuits was that it combined monastic centralism, which led to speedy and efficient decision making, with flexibility, adaptation, and taking into consideration the level of the individual and his freedom and responsibility. Strict obedience goes hand in hand with correct understanding of the situation and proper knowledge of the individual and his needs. The individual must think with the superior but he must act independently, and according to the situation. A certain level of spiritual, intellectual and emotional maturity was a pre-condition for such a life.

The second example was the Daughters of Charity founded by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. The period after the Reformation saw the emergence of real apostolic life among women religious, in spite of the strict regulations of the Council of Trent. Till then people knew of women religious who lived in a cloister and the only exception was the Beguines. Now women wanted to combine consecrated life with active involvement in the life of the people. But the Church was not willing to show the same generosity to women religious as was shown to men. So they had to make many accommodations and compromises, and even endure persecutions. But it is a fascinating story of the determination and perseverance of many women to be active in the Church, which they considered, was their birthright. The Daughters of Charity exemplifies this spirit. It was one of the most creative and pragmatic solutions found by consecrated women to overcome the restrictions of ecclesiastical legislation of the time, to be at the service of the poor and the needy. They may be called the first really apostolic order of women without cloister. Taking note of the social situation and the miserable condition of the most

marginalized of the society, Vincent de Paul organized a lay initiative of devout wealthy women. This was found to be not satisfactory as many of these ladies were unfit to cope with the situation, especially because of the social divide between them and the people whom they served. And so he wanted to found an order of women to serve the sick. For this the cloister was not suited at all. In 1633 Vincent de Paul suggested to Louise de Marillac, one of his rich helpers, to train girls for this purpose, and from this simple beginning grew the world famous congregation of the Daughters of Charity. Vincent had not intended to found a religious order. The sisters, he said, should consider themselves simply as Christian women devoted to the sick and the poor. They were not to live in secluded convents and not to take solemn vows but were to respond to the needs of the sick and the poor as consecrated women in the city. "Having no monastery but the houses of the sick and the place where their superior lives, having no cell but a rented room, no chapel but the parish Church, no cloister but the streets of the city, and no enclosure but obedience, they should go to the sick and to other places only when it is necessary for their service, having the fear of God for a grille and holy modesty for a veil."²⁸

The elimination of the physical structures of convent, grille, special habit etc., which the long tradition had defined as essential to protect the virtue of the consecrated virgin was surely radical. They were clear in what they wanted to do. It was the first, and till the nineteenth century, the only order founded solely for the care of the sick. They were also active in other spheres. He wanted for them no status of an order because then there would be strict enclosure. They would not be free to move about to look after the needy. Until 1642 they took no vows at all. The structure of being a congregation with simple vows was accepted by Rome in 1688. Till today they take vows for a year, which may be renewed year after year. They did not have any special habit but dress of the peasant women of the time, a gray wool tunic with a large cornette of white linen. The Daughters of Charity have always been held in high repute. This is one of the lessons from Church history that there are always openings for new initiatives and

²⁸ MacNamara Jo Ann Kay, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia*, Cambridge, MA, 1996, 482-3.

revolutionary ideas to be realized, provided it is done with a sense of pragmatism, ready to make reasonable adaptations and adjustments, but judging everything by the final goal. Since the female religious life of the time was not capable of being adapted to their needs, these women sought out a new form of religious life, which, although without the title of order, rendered the same or better services than most orders of the day. It is true that their consecration was considered a less authentic form of consecrated life but not their service. Not until 1900 were such groups of sisters (over 500 new congregations of this type had come up in the Church by then) recognized as true religious women!

5. Little Sisters and Brothers of the Poor of Charles de Foucauld

The next crisis in religious life came with the skepticism of the Enlightenment, the violence of the French Revolution and the arrogance of Secularization. There was a catastrophic decline in number of consecrated persons worldwide. According to the enlightened rulers, what was needed was a reform of the secular clergy and with that consecrated life would become superfluous in the Church. There was also internal crisis in many communities. But soon the consecrated persons were back, beginning with the restoration of Society of Jesus in 1814 and the founding of numerous new congregations of men and women who built up a vast network of care giving institutions worldwide so much so that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are one of the most dynamic periods in the history of consecrated life. It was also a time for resurgence of women. The old idea that women religious are to remain in cloister was gone for ever. Women also wanted to go to the missions because that was also Christian duty. And this was an utter novelty, unheard of in the past. The pioneer of this idea was Marie-Anne Javouhey, who founded the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, and sent her sisters to the missions already in 1817. These women had no doubt that their mission was a boon to distressed women throughout the world. In many countries it helped rethink the role of women in society. These sisters redefined the feminine apostolate in the modern world, and freed themselves from the limbo between clergy and laity, and moved into the very centre of religious and public life. Unlike the nuns of earlier times, these sisters could make space in a widening

world to develop their own visions. Modern day feminism is unthinkable without the foundation laid by a large number of women religious. Often these women provided the closest contact that many people ever had with the Church. Protected by their habits, they could move into any place, including the male world.

But basically all these new foundations were imitations of the previous ones. Generally the religious were asked to reject the spirit of modernity which was considered a danger. The result was the sacralization of old traditions and rules instead of critically and historically relativising them. Perhaps the only exception was the *Little Sisters and Brothers of the Poor of Charles de Foucauld*. They gave a historically new impulse to religious life which can be compared to similar paradigm shifts earlier. The Little Brothers and Sisters saw their specific calling in *human solidarity and participation in the life of the people, especially the poor*. Surely concern for the poor and the suffering was the main characteristic of most religious men and women. But what is new here is the participative life style which is Christologically founded. They follow Jesus not by imitating the desert fathers who understood the call to radical discipleship as abandoning everything and following Jesus or by creating an ideal Christian community after the model of the Acts of the Apostles; not by imitating Jesus and his disciples who went about preaching in poverty by active apostolate in the world and engaging in worldwide mission; they follow Jesus by imitating his hidden life in Nazareth before his public ministry: the life of Jesus with his people, sharing their ordinary life situations and problems by being present in their midst and working with his own hands. In this way, too, he made present God's love concretely among human beings. His public ministry was a continuation of this. The movement goes back to Charles de Foucauld, the Hermit of the Sahara. He himself did not found any religious congregation nor had any followers when he died. This was done by Rene Voillaume, on the basis of a set of Rules Charles de Foucauld had begun to draft, and therefore the idea of the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus goes back to him, in 1933 and 1939 respectively.

They imitate the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth by sharing the simple life of the people whom they serve among whom they live.

There is no direct apostolate but the apostolate of presence. They live in small groups of three to five, because that is the best way to be near to the people and to avoid institutionalisation. Normally they engage in some work to earn their living. But the spiritual contemplative core of the order is never forgotten which revolves around the Word of God and the Eucharist and its adoration. Christ who is present in the Eucharist is the model for their presence among the poor. Numerically the order is not large, but the influence is exemplary. Many consecrated men and women have found in them a model for the witnessing power of the Gospel today.

A second new development in the twentieth century has been the emergence of Secular Institutes, legally approved by the Church in 1947. This is another way of sharing the life of Jesus with the people. They do not accept most of the characteristics of traditional religious orders and congregations, like habit, separate houses, community living, specific apostolate etc. The Beguines and the Brethren of the Common Life of the Middle Ages could be considered the forerunners of the Secular Institutes. They take vows but not publicly. There is no external difference between them and ordinary people. They live privately but come together regularly. Training is common and there is a long period of formation. They do not have any specific work as their charism. They do any work, living in the world and sanctifying it with their Christian witness. Even priests and the laity are accepted as members by some of these institutes.

Conclusion

What does this short history teach us? Religious life has experienced many paradigm shifts in its history according to the needs of the time. There have always been attempts to creatively respond to historical situations. In fact, that is the vocation of consecrated persons. The Second Vatican Council challenges the religious to enter into a dialogue with the postmodern, globalized world of the twenty-first century. In many ways the call of the Council has been answered because the renewal that has been taking place after Vatican II to answer this challenge has been deep and authentic. However, it has not been free of problems, both theoretical and practical. The theological shift that has occurred in religious life needs to be actualized in a new

understanding of the vows, which are, primarily, not to be understood in juridical terms. Consecrated celibacy freely chosen for the sake of the Reign of God and lived in community and mission has been, and is, the defining characteristic of consecrated life. How many religious really possess the maturity and inner freedom to choose a life of celibacy in today's sexually over-charged world? Poverty today tends to be understood less as a collection of acts of personal self-denial, and more as solidarity with and responsiveness to the poor of the world. But group acquisitiveness, which led to the downfall of many religious orders in the past, appears to be one of the serious obstacles in the way of renewal of many religious institutes today. Obedience is now being reinterpreted in the context of the Gospel freedom, as a commitment to discern and follow the will of God in a community of equal disciples, rather than as a relation of subjection to superiors in a hierarchical power structure. However, the will of God often turns out to be individual or collective self-promotion. Religious life, ultimately, is worth only the freedom it engenders "to be creatively marginal to normal society in order to challenge its defects and serve at the most critical points where truth and love are at stake, thus functioning as an eschatological sign of the Reign of God."²⁹ How many consecrated persons and communities of religious today are truly eschatological signs of the Reign of God? It is doubtful whether many religious are called to live the life that they profess to live as members of a religious institute.

This radical interpretation of religious life demands entirely new structures and procedures, which have to develop from courageous and sometimes ambiguous experimentation. These new understandings and their appropriate institutional embodiments have been articulated in the revised constitutions of many institutes, whose egalitarian and participative structures and procedures have been often disproved by the Roman Curia, resulting in tension, growing frustration, and even hostility on the part of many religious.

²⁹ Sandra Schneiders, "Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), in: Adrian Hastings, ed., *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*, London, New York, 1991, 160.

The future of religious life lies in its charismatic function in the Church and in the world. The significance of religious life lay in the fact, that men and women were ready to listen to the radical call of the Gospel in their varied contexts, thus bringing about a decisive dynamism in the Church of their times. If the charismatic function of religious life is to remain alive in the Church, the religious must present themselves as men and women who have been freed by the power of the Gospel and have personally glimpsed meaning in the midst of a fractured world. This is both a personal as well as institutional challenge. Consecrated life, by and large, has emerged from the many historical crises unscathed, and therefore, it is safe to assume that it will overcome the present crisis, too, in some parts of the world. But for that they must be able to answer their inner call in freedom and live it in authenticity, partnership and collaboration. They should recognize and value their call to be at the service of the Gospel and live it fearlessly.

There are three spiritual disciplines that could be considered indispensable to religious life of the twenty-first century. The first is the necessity of detachment and inner freedom because only then can one attach more passionately to God and to fellow humans. The second is the willingness to be taught by the poor, and a perspective on life from the side of the poor, because, if the shifting Christian demography is any indication, the Church of the future will be a Church *of the poor*, and not a Church *for the poor*. And the third spiritual discipline that is indispensable for the religious of the future is to be “communities of justice” because the world is no longer impressed by charity when it is not built on justice. The historical examples we have seen are models in equipping us to face this challenge.

Oriens Theological College
 Shillong – 793008
 Meghalaya
 padinjarekuttu@gmail.com

The Meaning and Significance of Consecrated Life as Women Disciples of Christ

Shalini Mulackal

Today, the presence of women religious and other consecrated women in the Church gives concrete expression to Jesus' call to discipleship of equals. They are in the forefront of the Church making the *basileia* vision of Jesus experientially available to people especially those on the margins. Does the Indian context in general and the situation of women in particular pose any challenge to the understanding and living of Consecrated life? How are the women religious expected to live their consecrated life, their radical discipleship in such a way as to denounce patriarchal systems and attitudes, mindsets and customs that cripple women to live as full human beings created in the image and likeness of God? In the given context of women's dehumanizing situation, there is a need to explore how women consecrated to God and committed to follow Jesus radically, can live their lives prophetically and meaningfully. According to Shalini Mulackal, the call to radical discipleship implies a call to live the Gospel way of life. It is a call to live the values of the Reign of God which Jesus proclaimed and lived in his own life. It is a call to freedom, fellowship, justice and love. Dr Shalini Mulackal PBVM holds a doctorate in theology from the University of Madras. She teaches systematic theology at the Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi. She has published a number of books and articles on theology from the perspective of women and Dalits. At present she is the president of Indian Theological Association (ITA).

Introduction

There are about a hundred thousand Catholic women in India who feel themselves called to live as radical disciples of Jesus by embracing

consecrated life. Though consecrated life has come to a standstill in many countries of the West, Religious institutes in India are still getting fresh recruits for Consecrated life. Of course even in India, the number of women who opt for this way of life is fast declining and the locations from where these young women come from are shifting. But in spite of these changes, it is worthwhile for us in India to reflect on consecrated life and the challenges this way of life presents before us as women who promised to follow Jesus in a radical way. Does our Indian context especially that of women poses any challenge in our understanding and living of Consecrated life? How are we expected to live our consecrated life, our radical discipleship in such a way as to denounce patriarchal systems and attitudes, mindsets and customs that cripple women to live as full human beings created in the image and likeness of God? This paper is an attempt to reflect on Consecrated life as women disciples of Jesus who want to live their full humanity and enable other women too to live with full dignity and freedom.

1. Women - An Unwanted Species?

Looking at the overall situation of girls and women in this country, I sometimes wonder whether we belong to some unwanted species! It is obvious that persons of the male sex are continued to be valued more in our country. They enjoy special privileges in our homes, churches and in the public realm. The census of 2011 bears witness to the consequence of male child preferences existing in our country. Though there is marginal improvement in the sex ratio from 933 to 940 per 1000 males in the general category, the Child Sex Ratio (CSR) fell from 927 in 2001 to 914 in 2011. Obviously many parents still want a male child and therefore are ready to kill the female child. Instead of experiencing love, affection and warmth of the parents, the female child/foetus already experiences discrimination, rejection and even brutal violence from the very beginning of her existence.

Even if she escapes the violent murder in her mother's 'safe' womb, there is no guarantee for her safety and security among her loved ones. I am sure quite a number of women will be able to recount similar traumatic experiences of their childhood as this one. "When I was 7 years old, I used to stay with my grandmother, for both my parents were working. My mother's younger brother was not married

and when no one was there, he sexually abused me. This went on for about two months. I did not well understand what was happening and, as a child I didn't have the guts to tell anyone. Till today, I remember what happened to me. I cannot forget I am a victim. As a girl, I feel so ashamed; I am not able to raise my voice. My uncle is still alive. When I see him, I feel like slapping him, but I can't."¹ It is a painful and shameful fact that women experience discrimination, violence and injustice in the patriarchal Indian society and families. They undergo various types of domination and exploitation.

What is the collective predicament of women in India even in this twenty first century? Surely "our sex determines our common predicament in a very fundamental way" in spite of the fact that we are divided on the basis of class, caste, religion, race, education or the lack of it, one's field of work (in the house and/or outside the house), and other complex historical forces.² For most of us, from childhood onwards marriage is projected as the ultimate goal of our lives. In many places we are given away in marriage at a very tender age, even before we attain physical, mental or emotional maturity. We have very little freedom of choice and very often our marriage turns out to be an unequal affair.

Whether we work outside the home or not, the burden of house work, taking care of the aged and sick, and nurturing the young ones falls on us. For millions of us girls, the drudgery starts from our childhood, when we should be at school and playing. We toil with our mothers so that the family can be fed and- perhaps – a brother can go to school. As a result we are two-thirds of India's illiterates. Go to any metropolitan city of India and you will see lakhs of us from the Tribal belt working as domestic helps in order to sustain our families, to educate our siblings and earn livelihood for our dear ones. Often we do this at the risk of our good name and our future dream of having a family of our own.

¹ John Desrochers, "Women's Stories: Oppression and Struggle," in *Integral Liberation*, Vol 17/1, (March 2013): 3-13 at 4.

² See Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (eds.), *In Search of Answers, Indian women's Voices from Manushi- a selection from the first five years of Maushi*, (New Delhi: Horizon India Books, 1991), 246.

Often our heavy labour goes unnoticed and unacknowledged by society. What is still worse, we are socialized to believe that we do nothing! For instance if you ask any one of us what we are doing, often you will get the answer, "Oh nothing- I'm just a housewife." Yes we are taught to trivialize ourselves and our hard work. Even when we work outside the home, we are not treated justly. Except a few section of highly-educated among us who are in select professions and careers, most of us are paid much less than men even when we do the same job.

We know that our ability to create life is a vital service to society. But it has become our biggest liability. We are not allowed to control our own reproductive capacities. Our bodies are treated as the property of different men, whether fathers or husbands, to be guarded, used and abused. We are made into a sex object even within the sacred bonds of marriage. Our dignity as a person is violated over and over. For most of us excessive childbearing wears out our health, our strength, and our lives.

Isn't it strange that even when we are raped or molested, we are blamed and stigmatized and not the abuser? There are millions of us who are forcefully sold into hundreds of brothels in our country. We are considered as outcasts and referred to as prostitutes while the men who seek sexual services from us are referred with respectful terms such as clients and customers!

We are trained from childhood onwards to be afraid of many things- to be outside after dark, to travel alone, to step outside the home, to be alone in the home, to be with others, to acknowledge even to ourselves our desires- to love, to laugh, to live.

We have been systematically trained to be submissive, to suffer in silence. Often our religions too teach us to believe that we are created for a life of suffering. Often it is difficult for us to revolt because of the peculiar predicament in which we are in. We are intimately tied through personal bonds to and are dependent on those who have become instruments of our oppression. Therefore we have learnt to think of our problems, whether economic, emotional or sexual, as 'personal' and 'private' problems. We look for individual solutions-try to adjust

better, try to be a better wife, mother, daughter or daughter-in-law. Tied to our oppressors as we are, we try harder to mould ourselves to their requirements and demands. In the process we become willing instruments of our own oppression.³

It is in this context of the oppressive and life negating situation of Indian women that we now turn to our reflection on consecrated life and its significance for us as women in this country.

2. Consecrated Life in Christianity

Consecrated life is almost as old as Church itself. This form of life has been present in Christianity from the very beginning right up to the present day. It is a stable form of Christian living by those faithful who feel called to follow Jesus Christ in a more exacting way. It “is characterized by the public profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, in a stable state of life recognized by the Church.”⁴ The Code of Canon Law defines it as “a stable form of living by which the faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that, having been dedicated by a new and special title to his honour, to the building up of the Church, and to the salvation of the world, they strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God and, having been made an outstanding sign in the Church, foretell the heavenly glory.”⁵

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “From the very beginning of the Church there were men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty, and to imitate him more closely, by practicing the evangelical counsels. They led lives dedicated to God, each in his own way. Many of them, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, became hermits or founded religious families. These the Church, by virtue of her authority, gladly accepted and approved.”⁶ Consecrated life has assumed diverse forms in different centuries, starting from the eremitic life of the desert, the great Monastic Orders of both monks

³ *Ibid.* 246-248.

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), no. 944

⁵ Code of Canon Law, canon 573 # 1

⁶ CCC, no. 918

and nuns, Mendicant Institutes of the Middle Ages and Apostolic Institutes of the later times. Today, besides the Religious and Secular Institutes, there are other forms of Consecrated life exists in the Church. They include Societies of Apostolic Life, The order of Virgins, and Consecrated widows/widowers. Since the source and center of Consecrated life in Christianity is Jesus, it is distinct from monastic life found in other religious traditions like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. Basic to all forms of Christian Consecrated life is the desire to follow Christ of the Gospels and to be authentic to a Gospel way of life.

The history of the Church right from the early period witnessed powerful spiritual and prophetic movements led by several holy men and women. Hermits were the first on the scene. They left their homes, near and dear ones and entered the desert to lead a life totally consecrated to God. The difficult desert situation with sparse vegetation, thorny bushes, scarce water sources and modest temperature provided an ideal environment for the ascetics who wanted to have solitude and penitential life in their search for God-experience.⁷ St. Antony of Egypt (251-356) is the first well-known hermit and gradually eremitical movement began to spread in Egypt and Syria.

As time went by, it was found that all could not thrive to live such rigorous life without the support of a community and fixed time table. This gave way to the 'cenobites'⁸ who lived in close proximity while still maintaining a life of isolation. St. Pachomius (290- 346) led this type of consecrated life by writing down a Rule, according to which the hermits came together for meals, but kept strict silence and meditation. St. Basil (330- 379), the Father of Eastern Monasticism, further developed this form of life by writing a comprehensive Rule, under which the monks lived, prayed and worked together. They lived a common life based on moderation and fellowship. In the West it was St. Benedict of Nursia (480-543), who is well known especially on account of the Rule he wrote for the monks of Monte Cassino, the great monastery he founded in Italy.⁹

⁷ See Mathew Paikada, "Monastic Traditions and Apostolic Communities in Conflict?" in *Jeevadhara*, Vol XLI, No. 244, (July 2011): 271-285 at 272.

⁸ The literal meaning of this term is, 'life in common'

⁹ See Paikada, "Monastic Traditions and Apostolic Communities in Conflict?," 273.

3. Women and Consecrated Life in the Church

From the very beginning women too embraced Consecrated life. Since the following of Christ constitutes one of the basic characteristics of any form of consecrated life, we find its origins in the Gospels. Among those who accepted Jesus and his message, the Gospels portray two groups of people. A larger number of those who accepted the message remained in the same situation of home and work in which the Gospel found them. There is also a group of followers in a stricter sense: Those who accompanied Jesus in his missionary travels from Galilee to Jerusalem. Besides the twelve this group also included certain women (Mary Magdalene; Johanna, the wife of Chusa; Susanna; and others) who provided for them out of their own resources (Lk 8: 1-3, Mk 15: 40-41).

Within the early Christian communities, an "order" of widows developed a female apostolate to the sick and needy and an educational mission addressed particularly to women. These women were supported by the communities, in return for their prayer and for sharing the revelations that sprang from their intense meditations. 'These "widows" were the fountain head from which many springs flowed: communities of virgins, recluses, cloistered nuns, and care givers...' ¹⁰

The grouping of widows which began in the New Testament times (1 Timothy 5: 9-16) continued in the later generations of Christianity. Polycarp refers to them as "the altar of God." St. Ignatius of Antioch uses the term 'widows' in a technical sense in which it is extended to include not only genuine widows but also women who had never been married and who had committed themselves to a life of chastity. ¹¹

In the middle of the second century, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, testified that groups of women from every walk of life were leaving their homes, parents, and husbands- too literally interpreting the Gospel commands. ¹² Sometimes they went with prophets. Syneisactism, made

¹⁰ See Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 2.

¹¹ See Thomas C. O'Brien, (ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vole XII, (New York: The Catholic University of America, 1967), 289.

¹² See Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms* 26-27.

particularly noticeable by the propensity of male and female prophets to travel together and to regard one another as equals in the prophetic life, became tentative indicators of heresy. The clergy made a concerted attack on the prophets when they tried to alter certain established doctrines. Nevertheless, women and their chaste male partners were making a place for themselves in Christian churches everywhere.¹³

By the end of the second century, widows and virgins were clearly distinguished in the early Church; the former engaged in active life and the latter living a secluded life devoted chiefly to prayer and asceticism. Towards the end of third century, the order of widows gradually got replaced by deaconesses.

During the third and fourth centuries, there were many Christians who left the cities and withdrew into the desert. With the establishment of the Church during the time of Constantine, 'Christian life was less and less understood as a Gospel call to discipleship.'¹⁴ Fleeing to the desert was also a reaction to the growing clericalism and sacerdotalism of the church as well as desire to be away from corrupt cities. The desert dwellers shared an inherently anti-clerical ideal, subtly expressed in their ability to remain in the wilderness without the sacraments for decades at a time.¹⁵

Women played an important role in the development of asceticism in the West. For them the monastic life provided an alternative to marriage and offered them new independence from roles dictated by their culture.¹⁶ Melania the Elder, a wealthy Roman woman, moved to Jerusalem around 378 where she governed a community of some fifty women on the Mount of Olives. A number of women strongly influenced by Jerome, who became their director, practiced celibacy and gave themselves to the study of Scripture.¹⁷ St. Brigit established a "double" monastery of men and women at Kildare in the fifth century Ireland.¹⁸

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴ See Thomas P. Rausch, *Radical Christian Communities* (Collegeville, Minnesota: the Liturgical Press, 1990), 39.

¹⁵ See McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 86.

¹⁶ See Rausch, *Radical Christian Communities*, 366.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

4. Consecrated Life and Discipleship

Consecrated life in the Church is always understood as a closer following of Jesus. The ancient Christian tradition of the *imitatio Christi*, "the following of Christ", the seeking and going after Jesus, remains today the supreme reason for which Christians freely choose Consecrated life. Vat. II repeatedly stresses the 'following of Christ' as the fundamental characteristics of religious life. The following of Jesus is the special "profession" of religious life (*Perfectae Caritatis* 5) or their particular vocation (PC 8) whereas all Christians are called to follow Jesus through their professional life. "Religious life is thus a living out publically, professionally, institutionally (and therefore in community) of the following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel, and so of the Gospel values that are implicit in all Christian life."¹⁹

All three synoptic Gospels describe both specific women and a general group of women as followers of Jesus (Mk. 15: 40-41; Lk.8: 1-3; Mt. 27:55-56). It is significant that both Mark and Matthew use the Greek word *akolouthēin* for women followers as well. In the New Testament the use of this word signifies the following of the historical Jesus. As far as the Gospels are concerned, there is no distinction made between the disciples of Jesus based on gender. Besides following Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, women were the first to receive the news about Jesus' resurrection. All four Gospels bear witness to this fact (Mk. 16: 1-8; Lk.24: 1-10; Mt. 28: 1-8; Jn. 20: 11-18). They were entrusted with the great task of proclaiming the good news of the resurrection.

Discipleship in the Gospels seems to be reflecting two key aspects. First, Jesus' call to discipleship is a call to discipleship of equals. Second, it is a call to lead a life according to his teachings and thus to further the reign of God. It means "recognizing him in those who are poor and those who are suffering."²⁰ Discipleship engages one in cooperating with the power of God in transforming the present. It carries a practical

¹⁹ See George Soares -Prabhu, "Prophetic Dimension of the Religious Life," *CRI Bulletin* (December 1986): 8.

²⁰ Alejandro Cussianovich, *Religious Life and the Poor: Liberation Theology Perspective* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd. , 1979), 52.

and critical edge. It involves both, the mystical and the political, worshipping praise of God and action on behalf of justice, personal conversion and critical engagement on oppressive situations, spirituality and the work of re-creation. All these are profoundly integrated when we understand Consecrated life as the life of discipleship.²¹

Consecrated women from the earliest periods of religious history in Europe provided shelter, education, social development and catechetical direction for women, whom no one considered worth serving. Many religious orders of women were founded in a flurry of social needs. They came together in order to respond to situations of need. They followed the call of Jesus so that the blind could see, the lame could walk and the poor could have the 'good news', proclaimed to them in loving service.²²

5. Prophetic Living of Women Discipleship in India

In the given context of women's dehumanizing situation, we need to explore how women consecrated to God and committed to follow Jesus radically, can live their lives prophetically and meaningfully. Call to radical discipleship implies a call to live the Gospel way of life. It is a call to live the values of the Reign of God which Jesus proclaimed and lived in his own life. It is a call to freedom, fellowship, justice and love.

Being born into a patriarchal society, women in general are socialized in a male-preferred milieu and have internalized the values of the patriarchal system which often hinder their inner freedom to develop fully as human persons. Women who have joined religious life are no exception to this. They enter various religious institutes with internalized patriarchal conditionings, values and attendant behaviour patterns which are not liberative for themselves or for others. Radical discipleship demands that they take efforts to become aware of their socio-cultural conditionings which go contrary to the Gospel values. For instance, women who are conditioned to believe in their inferior status cannot empower other women.

²¹ See Elisabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., "Discipleship : Root Model of the Life Called Religious," *Review for Religious* vol. 42, (1983): 866-867 at 870.

²² Joan Chittister, OSB, "The Prophetic Dimension of Religious Life," *Religious Life Review*, Vol. 35, No 177, (Mar- April 1996): 79-87 at p.82.

If a hundred thousand women disciples of Jesus are awakened to their real potential as persons created in the image and likeness of God, who possess equal dignity and worth as men, who are made equal members of the mystical body of Christ through baptism and who are sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit, then they can be powerful agents of God's Reign bringing about equality, justice, peace and sisterhood/brotherhood in our society. They will be empowered women who can empower their sisters who are made to believe in their worthless existence as women in a male-normative society.

A few percent of the present day women religious are awakened to this reality. Joining hands with other awakened secular women, it will be their responsibility to create gender sensitivity among fellow women disciples/religious and strive for gender justice in whatever sphere they are involved in. They need to come together occasionally to reflect together and to gather their energies and become ever more conscious about how patriarchy is operative not only in socio-economic, religious-cultural, politico-legal aspects of life but also in their own thinking and acting. There is no other way for Indian women religious to be prophetic than to be an empowered woman who is committed to the cause of empowering her sisters.

Concluding Remarks

It is very clear from the above discussions that Consecrated life is a call to follow Jesus in a radical way. Following Jesus constitutes the heart of Consecrated life. The Gospels bear witness to the fact that Jesus preached and practiced the concept of equality of all. The *reign of God* vision which he proclaimed emphasized the radical equality of all human beings. Therefore his invitation to follow him was an invitation to form a community of disciples who will bear witness to the Reign of God vision through their very lives. Women were part of his "discipleship of equals."

Consecrated life existed from the very beginning of the Church. Women were part of this movement all throughout the centuries. Women were full partners in urban apostolate and desert asceticism. Even in sexually segregated communities, monks and nuns, brothers and sisters, subjected themselves to the same disciplines and shared

their labor and its fruits. Chaste celibacy endowed virgin martyrs and desert mothers with the power and authority that nature normally reserved for men. Virginity wiped out gender differences by giving women independence and authority like men to pursue a lofty spiritual calling.

Today, the presence of women religious and other consecrated women in the Church gives concrete expression to Jesus' call to discipleship of equals. They are in the forefront of the Church making the *basileia* vision of Jesus experientially available to people especially those on the margins. They have personally answered Jesus' call to radical discipleship by renouncing marriage and family life and have left their homes and dear ones in order to pursue their dream of being authentic disciples of Jesus. It is through their lives that they continue to bear witness to Jesus' call to "Discipleship of equals." For Jesus' women disciples in India, it means working for their own liberation from the crippling impacts of internalized patriarchy and helping their sisters to become empowered women.

Flexible Communities of Spiritual Seekers

Sebastian Painadath

The disciples of Jesus identified him with the Kingdom of God which he had proclaimed during his public ministry. Following Jesus radically would mean that the disciples live the kingdom values in communion with him. Consecrated religious life is a way of living radical commitment to Jesus and the Kingdom values of Jesus. This would bring them closer to spiritual seekers of other religions. The deeper we grow in Christ-consciousness, the closer we come to the sisters and brothers of other religions. The Buddhist influence on the Christian ascetical life and practice reveals to us that authentic spirituality transcends boundaries of religions. It must be admitted that the mystical experiences and liberative potential of other religions would fertilize the spirituality of the communities of consecrated life. Here the ashram heritage of India can open new avenues to the future. Thus the author of this article, Dr. Sebastian Painadath, explores also the possibilities of renewing religious life in dialogue with other religions. As the traditional pattern of a rigid *religious* community with the three vows does not enthuse young seekers any more, he opines that, perhaps, the time has come to explore other forms of consecrated life. Dr Sebastian Painadath, SJ is the founder Director of Sameeksha, Ashram, Kalady, Kerala. He holds a doctorate in Theology from the University of Tuebingen, Germany. He is engaged in inter-religious dialogue and spiritual ministries in India, Europe and in the East Asian countries. He has published a number of books and articles on Indian Christian Spirituality and Inter-religious Dialogue.

Introduction

In the historical evolution of the forms of consecrated life in the Church there have been moments of exploration. Responding to the

new challenges new forms of consecrated life evolved across the centuries. We are now going through a moment of radical change in this regard. In the West many feel that the traditional patterns of established communities with the three vows do not have a future. The style of life lived by the consecrated persons does not apparently inspire young ones. With the acute dearth of vocations several Congregations are already sensing that they are moving to a dead end. In India too the local Churches, which for decades supplied most vocations, are in a crisis. One thing is clear: we cannot carry the past to the future. We need to have the openness and courage *to listen to what the Spirit is telling the Church today.*

Towards a Community of Spiritual Seekers

Three things seem to be important in this discernment process: 1) Openness to the *Spirit that blows where it wills* should characterize a community of consecrated life. A lifestyle regimented with a lot of rules and structures will not create an ambience of spiritual search. The spiritual heritage of India is known for its radical openness to the mystery of the Divine beyond all personified forms of God. If consecrated life has to have relevance in India it must initiate spiritually open communities. 2) A community of consecrated life has to be deeply inserted to the local Church: not to the hierarchical Church or ritual Church, but to the Church as the *people of God*. The divide between the clergy and the laity, between the religious and the secular, is a catastrophe in the Church. Overcoming this divide, the communities of consecrated life should embrace the entire people of God. This would mean that we need to design communities of consecrated life having married and unmarried members, young and old, spiritual seekers with a commitment for a definite period of time or for the rest of their life. Here laws will give way to the Spirit and structures will constantly adapt themselves to need of the times. 3) In a world that is becoming increasingly pluralistic, the communities of consecrated life will have to open their doors to spiritual seekers of other religions too. Spirituality evolves beyond religions; the Kingdom of God takes shape beyond the Church. Communities of consecrated life have to imbibe the Kingdom values of Jesus, which would bring them closer to spiritual seekers of other religions. The deeper we grow in Christ-consciousness, the closer

we come to the sisters and brothers of other religions. The mystical experiences and liberative potential of other religions would fertilize the spirituality of the communities of consecrated life. Here the ashram heritage of India can open new avenues to the future.

Keeping this perspective in mind let us look back on the cultural influences at the origins of consecrated life in the Church, and look ahead towards a possible path into the future of consecrated life. What can we learn from the Hindu and Buddhist monastic experiences in this regard?

Buddhist Presence in the Nile Valley

When we study the history of the forms of consecrated life in the Church, we come to their origins with the Desert Fathers/Mothers. In the first three centuries martyrdom was considered to be a special grace in Christian life. But in many local Churches Christians were not persecuted. So they explored other forms of radical living. A married couple began an ascetical life in the Egyptian desert on mutual consent to continence in view of intense spiritual discipline. Several took to this way of life in the subsequent years. These hermits were called “spiritual persons” (*Homines spirituales*), for people used to seek their guidance in spiritual life. The most known hermit is Anthony (251-356). Later the hermits got together to live in communities. This cenobite movement gradually came to Mount Sinai and further to Mount Athos. The hermits of the Egyptian desert form the earliest stage of consecrated life in the Church.

Critical scholarship explores the cultural matrix of this ascetical movement. Judaism does not subscribe to this form of ascetical life. Consecrated virginity / celibacy has never been extolled as a spiritual value in the Semitic culture. Even today the Semitic religions like Judaism and Islam do not approve the celibate way of life. Jesus lived a celibate life and praised it as special grace for those chosen for it. (Mt. 19:11) Yet his cultural milieu was not in favour of this way of life.

Hence the question remains: what has been the cultural influence that gave rise to the ascetical life of the Desert Fathers/Mothers and later to the forms of consecrated life in the Church. This question takes us to the Buddhist culture in the Nile valley in the pre-Christian

era. This may sound surprising for many readers; let me mention a few references which speak for the Buddhist presence in Alexandria and down the Nile valley in Egypt.

1. Asoka (272-232), who waged the Kalinga war that left behind hundreds of dead bodies, was moved by the tragic consequences of the war and he took the vow: "no more war". He pledged to send Buddhist monks in all directions to preach the message of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and to bring to people their wisdom of healing ailments through herbs and meditation. Thus the Buddhist monks came to China in the north, to Ceylon in the South and to Thailand in the east. Those who moved westwards travelled via Gandhar and crossed the Arabian Desert and the Red Sea; finally they got settled along the Nile Valley. Egypt had a culture of openness to other religions and cultures and hence the Buddhist monks could establish their ascetical communities south of Alexandria.

2. In the 13th rock edict of Asoka the foreign rulers to whom the monks were sent are mentioned: "Here in the king's domain among the Greeks, the *Kambojas*, the Nabhakas, the Nabhapamkits, the Bhojas, the Pitinikas, the *Andhras* and the *Palidas*, everywhere people are following Beloved-of-the-Gods' instructions in Dhamma. They are sent to the regions of Amtiyoko (Antiochus II, Syria-Bactria, 261-246). Turamaye (Ptolemy II, Philadelphos of Egypt, 285-247), Amtikini (Antigonos II Gonatas of Macedonia, 278-239), Maka (Magas, Cyrene, 300-258) and Alikasudaro (Alexander II, Epirus)." Egypt was then in the Greek empire.

3. In the 5th rock edict of Asoka it is said: "The Dhamma Mahamatras work among all religions for the establishment of Dhamma, for the promotion of Dhamma, and for the welfare and happiness of all who are devoted to Dhamma. They work among the Greeks, the *Kambojas*, the Gandharas, the Rastrikas, the Pitinikas and other peoples on the western borders."

4. In the 2nd rock edict of Asoka the mission given to the monks has been clarified: "Everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Priyadasi, made provision for two types of medical treatment: medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals. Wherever medical herbs

suitable for humans or animals are not available, I have had them imported and grown. Along roads I have had wells dug and trees planted for the benefit of humans and animals.” “Among servants and nobles, brahmans and wealthy householders, among the poor and the aged, they are working for the welfare and happiness of those devoted to Dhamma and for the removal of their troubles. They are busy in promoting the welfare of prisoners should they have behaved irresponsibly, or releasing those that have children, are afflicted, or are aged. They are busy everywhere, here [at Pataliputra] and in all the women’s residences, whether my own, those of my brothers and sisters, or those of other relatives.”

5. The Buddhist monks could reach the Greek world because already before the 3rd century BCE there have been contacts between India and the Greco-Egyptian world. Hecataeus and Herodotus of Greece speak of India in their writings. Alexander, who invaded the Indus valley (327-325 BCE), is thought to have been accompanied by scholars, who held philosophical dialogue with the Indian gurus. Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador to India, (350-290 BCE) wrote a travelogue on India.¹

6. The Buddhist monk Nagasena is reported to have had dialogues with the Bactrian King Menander, as found in the Pali text *Milinda Panha*.²

7. In the Buddhist chronicle *Mahavamsa* mention is made of a Monks’ Conference in Ceylon in 150 BCE, to which several Buddhist monks came from Alasadda (Alexandria).³

8. Ptolemy II King of Egypt is reported to have conducted an Indian festival at Alexandria in 270 BCE, to which the treasures of India like ivory, teak, silk, perfumes and cock-feather were exhibited.⁴

9. A gravestone from the Ptolemaic period displaying Buddhist symbols was discovered at Dendera in Egypt. Statues of Buddha carved in Greek style are found in Alexandria and Gandhara.⁵

¹ Alois Pieris, *Love meets Wisdom*, New York, Orbis, 1988, p. 139

² Ibid. p.139

³ Elmar Gruber, *The Original Jesus, The Buddhist Sources of Christianity*, Shaftesbury: Element, 1996, p. 178

⁴ Ibid., p.176

⁵ Ibid.

10. The historian Periplus describes the trade routes between Egypt and India. He speaks of Indian harbours like Zizerus (Mangalore), Muchiri (Cranganore) and Balita (Calicut).⁶

11. In the Christian era the Church Fathers do mention the vibrant presence of Buddhist monks in the Nile valley. Clement of Alexandria writes on them: "The *samanas* (Sravanas) from India are by nature peaceful. They never commit murder or adultery; they do not eat animal food, nor do they worship idols; they are never drunk." (Recognitions 1: 52) Seeing them practicing herbal medicine Clement calls them gymnosophists (those who knew the wisdom of the body).⁷

12. Hippolytus of Rome (170-236) speaks of them eloquently in *Elenches*: "They affirm that God is Light. They hold on to the knowledge through which the secret mysteries of nature are perceived by the wise...They speak of human nature as captivity within congenial struggles...Those who win victory over them reach the Divine." (The Refutation of Hereises 1: 21.)⁸

13. Other Church Fathers like Justin, Tertullian, Origen, Appollonius, Jerome and Ambrose mention Indians in their writings. (ibid. p. 72) Pantaenus, the founder of the Theological school in Alexandria visited India around 180 CE. Plotinus, a companion of Origen, is reported to have had close acquaintance with the Indian methods of meditation and ways of thinking. (Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*, Delhi: Motilal, 1988, pp.2-23)

These are some of the historical evidences to prove the spiritual presence of Buddhist monasticism in the Nile Valley right up to Alexandria, perhaps even up to Athens and Ephesus. It is in this melting pot of East and West that Jewish and Christian monasticism originated.

Buddhism and the Essenes

Monasticism is alien to Jewish mentality and religiosity. Still a monastic movement within the Jewish circles emerged in Alexandria

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 1:15

⁸ Cited in Elizabeth Isichei, "Passages to India: Western Images of Indian Spirituality in the Ancient and Medieval World", *Dialogue and Alliance*, 5 (1999), p. 72

around 150 BCE: the Essenes. Later they moved to the shores of the Dead Sea. It was in fact a protest movement against the ostentatious ritualistic religiosity of the Jerusalem-centered Judaism. They withdrew into the silence of the heart with a disciplined practice of contemplation and ascetical exercises for self-purification. They lived in small communities under the guidance of the abbot, to whom they vowed obedience and submission. Most of them lived a celibate life. One can find quite a lot of similarities when one reads the rules of the Essene communities found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the rules of the classical Buddhist *samghas*.

Buddhism and Greek Therapists

There has been some influence of Buddhism on the Greeks too. Perhaps impressed by the disciplined life and healing practices of the Buddhist monks certain Greeks began to develop an alternate way of life. These are the “therapeutae”. Most of them lived in Alexandria. They too lived a celibate life, lived on begging and practiced intense meditation through which they developed certain healing powers. They claimed to be in touch with the cosmic forces of healing energy. They were very much engaged in the healing ministry. The Buddhist Bhikkus were called “Theraputra”, for they believed to be the sons of Buddha (*Thera*) on the path of enlightenment. A certain etymological relationship can be traced between the terms ‘theraputra’ and ‘therapeutae’. (Elmar Gruber, *The Original Jesus*, p.179-181)

Buddhism and the Desert Hermits

What is more significant for us is to explore the influence of Buddhist monasticism on the emergence of monastic movement in Christianity. If monasticism in Christianity originated with the Desert Fathers / Mothers of Egypt in the 3-4 centuries one cannot overlook the impact of the spiritual and cultural milieu shaped by the Buddhist presence. One may not force the conclusion that Christian monasticism is a product of Buddhist monasticism, for the basic faith elements in these two religions are so different. Buddhism would never speak of belief in a personal God, which is central to Christian God-experience. There is a marked difference between the smiling Buddha and the crucified Christ. Yet the formative role of the living context cannot be ignored.

Let us look at the following elements of similarities between the two monastic traditions.

1. Radical renunciation is the basic value of Buddhist monasticism. One renounces the fixation on the ego-self by giving up possessions, family bonding and sexual life. One lives in submission to the head of the sangha. The Christian monastic communities evolved on the basis of the three vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience.

2. A Buddhist monk has to practice three things: *seela* (compassionate conduct), *samadhi* (practice of meditation) and *prajna* (study of the suttas). In the Christian monastic communities too contemplation, study and works of compassion are decisive. The Benedictines later developed the principle, *ora et labora*, pray and work.

3. Buddhists have been practicing the prayer of the name. They repeat or chant meditatively the name of Buddha to enter into the Buddha-consciousness. Sometimes they use beads or wheels for this devotional practice. Nowhere in the Bible there is mention of practicing the prayer of the divine Name. The Desert Fathers / Mothers however picked up this practice by repeating devotedly the name of Jesus (*monologia*). Later this form developed into the Prayer of the Heart (*hesychia*), which spread widely in the Greek orthodox Churches. Perhaps the inspiration came from the Buddhist monks.

4. The Buddhist monks lived a celibate life. For them celibacy / virginity was accepted as a powerful means of overcoming the fixation on the ego-self and growing in inner freedom unto *nirvana*. Classical Judaism would not look at celibacy as a valid spiritual way of life. From the time of the Desert Fathers / Mothers celibacy came to be accepted in Christian life as a powerful witness of a Kingdom of God oriented life. If in the later centuries celibacy / virginity was taken as a special grace and vocation in forms of consecrated life, the impact of the Buddhist monasticism cannot be ignored.

5. In the Buddhist sanghas there was the practice of confessing one's mistakes to the head of the community on certain prescribed days. This was an expression of one's deep loyalty to the community. The Essene communities introduced this practice in their monastic life. The Desert Fathers / Mothers too picked up this practice. People

used to go to them and confess their sins for they were considered to be *homines spirituales*. In the cenobite communities and monastic circles this practice evolved until in the second millennium the practice of private confession entered the wider Church as the sacramental form of reconciliation. Since there is no biblical basis for private confession can we overlook the possible influence of the Buddhist praxis in this regard?

6. What is most interesting is that for centuries Gautama Buddha was venerated in the Church as St. Joasaph. The life story of Buddha conveyed to the West by the Buddhist monks and their deep devotion to him made such an impression among Christians that the figure of a saint emerged out of that. Joasaph attained illumination through renunciation, as is the case with Gautama Siddhartha. "The Bollandists, the Jesuit historians, have documented the embarrassing fact that St. Joasaph, venerated as a saint in the medieval Church, was none other than the Buddha himself." (Alois Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, New York, Orbis, 1988, p.25) Bodhisatva became Budasaf in Arabian literature and Iodasaph in Greek (as introduced by St. Euthymius in Crimea) and Joasaph in the devotional literature of the West. Before Francis of Assisi it was the figure of St. Joasaph that inspired Christians for a radical life-style.

Buddhism and Christian Monasticism

If Buddha became a saint *in vestigio* in the Church and Buddhist spiritual practices indirectly influenced the emergence of consecrated life, why should we today shy off to imbibe the sublime elements of Asian spirituality into Christian life? In fact the spiritual influence of Buddhism on Christians in Europe and America today is an astonishing phenomenon. In many formation houses and retreat centres of the Church serious courses are being offered with elements of Zen, Vipasana and Tich Nat Khan's awareness meditations. Rather than looking at it as a "betrayal of faith" (Hans Urs von Balthasar) we should esteem it as a new exploration into the silent depth of Christian spirituality. Many Christians rediscover the mystical dimension of faith in encounter with Buddhism. And Buddhist masters take interest in Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart, Tauler and Teilhard de Chardin.

In the local Churches of India today the elaborate popular devotions, the noisy charismatic prayer forms and ostentatious liturgical performances dominate the spiritual life of the masses. Though many young professionals, the critical intellectuals and the spiritual seekers do not resonate with them, the official Church seems to support these forms of immense popular appeal. This is also a way of domesticating the believing community in certain formal patterns of piety. One should here ask if a genuine growth towards spiritual maturity and inner freedom takes place through these forms. What is conspicuous is that we Christians make a lot of noise in devotional practices so much so that we lose the ability to listen to the Spirit in silence. Most Christians cannot even sit in contemplative silence for half an hour. Real spiritual growth however takes place in contemplative silence, not in noisy programmes. This is what we should learn from the Buddhist tradition. The spiritual seekers of the Desert learned the power of silence from the Buddhists. In the West today many spiritual seekers take to Buddhist meditations to experience the transforming grace of silence. This culture has not yet come to India, the birth-land of Buddhism!

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in its Second Plenary Assembly, Calcutta, 1978, said in the Final Statement: "Considering the many positive values of Asian contemplative forms of prayer for the enrichment of the life of prayer in the Church, steps should be taken to undertake in-depth studies of the sacred writings of other religions, of the various Asian forms of prayer and meditation, and of the different authentic forms of popular piety." (cfr. Rosales / Arevalo, ed: For All peoples of Asia, FABC Documents, Quezon city, Claretian Publ. 1992, p. 39) And in *Ecclesia in Asia* Pope John Paul II too upholds the need of imbibing the contemplative dimension of Asian spirituality. "Renunciation, detachment, humility, simplicity and silence are considered great values by the followers of all religions." (nr. 23) If India is the womb of sannyasa and the home of sages the local Churches here have to enter deep into the contemplative traditions of India and give rise to new forms of consecrated life, which are more authentic and inspirational. The Church can learn a lot from the sublime ashram heritage of India in this regard.

Hinduism and Christian Monasticism

One thing becomes clear in encounter with the Hindu tradition. The Hindus have an immense freedom in spiritual search, but a lot of constraints in social mobility. Christians on the other hand have a lot of limitation in spiritual search, but great freedom in social relations. Over the centuries Christian spirituality has been loaded with too many dogmas and doctrines, norms and forms, rules and regulations. Though our faith in Christ has to give us an immense freedom to move with *the Spirit that blows where it wills*, we tend to develop a petty figure of Jesus and worship it. Christomonism is not Christocentric life. This narrowness is unfortunately very conspicuous in communities of consecrated life. The traditional structures and devotional forms make them too much bound to the past that they are unable to move with the ever widening horizons of the Spirit manifested in Jesus Christ. In prayer life most religious seem to remain *novices* until the end of life. Alertness to *what the Spirit is telling the Church* should be the characteristic of a community of consecrated life.

This presupposes inner freedom and mobility. "If Christ has made you free, you are free. Do not let yourselves be fastened again to the yoke of slavery." (Gal. 5:1) This admonition of Paul is especially relevant for communities of consecrated life today. In fact these communities are called to be "Kingdom communities" giving an authentic witness to the emergence of the new being in all realms of life. A community of consecrated life can be authentic only by creating a space for genuine spiritual growth through alert spiritual search. Such a community will spontaneously make room for spiritual seekers to enter upon a relentless search with the divine Spirit that transcends letters and overcomes the boundaries. Tony D'Mello used to say that the role of a superior in a religious community is not to rule with the Constitutions and see to it that all members abide by the given norms, but to help them break the rules by discerning the movement of the Spirit that takes them beyond the prescribed norms. Communities of consecrated life in the Church have credibility in a country like India only in as much as they become communities of spiritual search, also with the co-pilgrims of other religions.

The traditional name for consecrated life in India is *sannyasa*. This term means total (*sam*) renunciation (*nyāsa*). What one renounces is

ultimately the possessive attachment to the ego-self (*ahamkāra*). When one is liberated from greed one matures in inner freedom (*nishkāma*) and wakes to a divine self-awareness (*ātma-bōdha*). The sannyasin discovers his/her true self in union with the divine Self and thus realizes the divinity within oneself. The goal of sannyasa is self-realization.

The Three Forms of Sannyāsa

There are basically three forms of sannyasa in the Indian heritage:

- 1) Those who have reached the fourth stage of an integrated life process are called sannyasins. After the phases of being first a student (*brhamacharya*), then a householder (*gruhasta*) and later an ascetic in the forest (*vānaprastha*), one reaches the fourth phase of total renunciation (*sannyāsa*). This means that the sannyasins are rather elderly people.
- 2) Some may continue the study and spiritual search after the first phase without taking to family life. These are the few who feel called to a life of permanent celibacy. They live a simple life characterised by intense asceticism and meditation. They are intent on self-realization right from the beginning. These are found in all age groups.
- 3) There is then a third form of sannyasa which is a spiritual attitude. "The one who does the needed work without clinging on to the fruits of action is truly a sannyasin." (Bhagavad Gita, 6:1) Here sannyasa is not a stage or state of life but a matter of inner freedom with which one lives an active life. With this a householder or a student, a king or farmer, can truly be a sannyasin. Sannyasa gives a spiritual quality to life. "Be united with the Divine and do your work without greed." (Gita, 2:48) – this is the principle of sannyasa. The Gita perspective on sannyasa embraces the integration of the threefold marga: bhakti-jnana-karma. (S.Painadath SJ, *The Integrated Spirituality of the Bhagavad Gita, Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 2004, 305-324)

The Four Stages of Life

The traditional patterns of consecrated life in the Church follow the second form mentioned above for the members live with the three vows. The third form is a spiritual attitude that permeates all walks of life. Has the first form any relevance for the future of consecrated life in the Church?

The successive stages of the four aaramas were pursued mostly in the brahminic circles. However the vision behind this system integrates the elements of study and discipline, love and concern, renunciation and asceticism as well total inner freedom and availability into an integral spirituality. "The aarama system is a theological construct within the Hindu hermeneutical tradition; it should be distinguished from the socio-religious institutions comprehended by the system." (Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, New Delhi: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998, p. 62) We shall therefore examine its relevance independent of the brahminic community. The evolution of life through the four stages is not just a matter for the individual concerned, rather the individual is inserted deeply into the community through these stages. It is the community that initiates the young student and nourishes the family. The recluse lives for the community and finally the one at the sannyasa stage is totally free to be totally available to the community.

After having been initiated to spiritual discipline and the study of the great Scriptures, normally one enters into family life. The last discourse of the master, while sending the student back home is quite revealing: (Tait. Upanishad, 1.11.1-6) "See the Divine in everyone, in your father and mother, guest and teacher. Be devoted to continue the thread of the offspring. Live a life of truthfulness and righteousness." During the second phase as a householder one has to invest all the energies in the upkeep of the family. In any social involvement the family concern has the highest priority.

When a householder sees wrinkles and grey hair on the body, and the son gets a child the family has to be entrusted to the son; the parents can now retire to solitude. (Manusmriti, 6:2) Normally the father goes to the forest and the mother lives secluded in the village, or both together take to a dwelling in the forest. Control of the senses, discipline in the study of the Scriptures, compassion to all beings, generosity in giving and equanimity are some of the spiritual qualities at this phase of ascetical life. (Manusmriti, 6: 4, 8). During this phase one meditates on what one learnt as a *brahmachari* and what one experienced as a householder. It is a long process of discerning the divine presence in the journey of life. It is not expected that one has to live long in a forest. The term 'forest' (*vanam*) is a symbol for a life of retreat and

intense spiritual pursuits. Responding to an inner call the recluse may come back to society to take up leadership functions like being a teacher or judge, ruler or arbitrator, healer or master. But in all this one remains a spiritual wanderer (*parivrājaka*), “totally unattached” (Manusmṛiti, 6:41), “without ever getting angry, but speaking only noble words” (6:48), “not getting remuneration on services” (6:50), “not causing injury to any creature” (6: 52). This third phase of life – say between the age of 50 and 75 – is a period of immense creativity. On the solid spiritual foundation laid at the first phase and in the light of the ardent experiences with the family at the second phase, one comes to a process of deep reflection that can lead to a mature commitment to civic life. This age group is a great human potential in any society. People of this phase of life are truly sannyasins if they live a life of inner freedom as advocated in the third form of sannyasa mentioned above.

Traditional Forms of Religious Life in Crisis

What is the relevance of this *vānaprastha* for a renewed vision of consecrated life in the Church? In Christian communities a lot of people become ardent spiritual seekers at the third phase of life. Much of their family obligations has been fulfilled and hence they are free. Most of them have also retired from their professional life. They have a lot of free time and a certain enthusiasm to get newly involved in the active life of the Church as well as of civic society. With the rich experience in personal life and with their great professional competence they bring up a tremendous potential for civic and ecclesial society. What they seek is a new spirituality and a sense of belonging to a supportive spiritual community. Most of them come forward as individual seekers; some of them may be members of some religious associations. But what they really need a spiritual community in which they could feel at home and inspired and guided by competent spiritual masters. This is a *sign of the times*. We need to discern the movement of the divine Spirit working in human hearts.

Does not the Spirit of the Risen Christ inspire the Church to offer these seeking souls a spiritual home, a supportive community with a liberative spirituality? The existing parishes are anonymous communities; the pious associations are just functional realities with a

very limited scope for growth. Beyond them the spiritual seekers of the third phase of life need vibrant supportive communities with an authentic spiritual tradition. It is here that the present communities of consecrated life could *listen to what the Spirit is telling the community*.

The form of consecrated life with a permanent commitment based on the three vows of poverty, virginity and obedience has been a proven form of life within the Catholic Church. It is one form of *religious* life. Have we not now reached a stage in which other forms have to be explored with the Spirit? Most of the traditional religious Orders / Congregations – active and contemplative – are facing the problem of vocations. In the West this problem is acutely felt. Within a few years all religious Institutes all over the world will have to face this crisis. Already now several Institutes have heard their death knell. Every crisis is a painful ordeal, and at the same time a time of grace: a *kairos* to look towards the future with the eyes of the divine Spirit irrespective of the past.

Flexible Communities with Spiritual Seekers

What is here needed is radical rethinking on the role and future of the communities of consecrated life in the Church. The following elements seem to be important in this regard:

1. The theological divide between the clergy and the laity is a tragedy in the Church. Consequently the members of a religious Institute tend to feel that they follow a vocation higher than that of the laity. This spiritual superiority complex is not in tune with the vision of Jesus. Individuals and communities of consecrated life are in fact part of the wider ecclesial community. They follow the life of poverty to share their goods with the people of God, especially with the poor; they keep the vow of virginity to be totally generous to the people; they live a life of obedience to make themselves fully available to any service to the people. Hence the wider sectors of the people of God form the theological ambience for the communities of consecrated life.

2. This deep insertion of the religious Institutes to the wider Church would demand a radical self-emptying process. The individual members of a religious community may claim to be free from greed and possession; but the religious Institute itself tends to be rich and insulated,

closed within itself and too much concerned with its own property rights and financial security. This makes it insensitive to the movements of the Spirit. A genuine *kenosis* has to take place in the religious Institutes, a credible incarnational insertion to the wider ecclesial and civic community. This would mean that they let the people have a share in their goods and properties, homes and institutions. They have to become *communities with open doors*. (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 46) This is the radical demand of evangelical *poverty*.

3. If the number of Christians at the third phase of life seeking a spiritual home is increasing today, and if the number of the members of the traditional communities of consecrated life is decreasing, the call of the Spirit of the Risen Christ is clear: open the doors of the communities to these spiritual seekers. May they feel at home in the houses of those living with the three vows. May they be spiritually nourished by the spiritual riches of the community. May those living with the vows and these lay spiritual seekers form *one* community alert to the movements of the Spirit. In this process those living with the vows will discover new dimensions of evangelical life, and the incoming spiritual seekers will be nourished by a supportive spirituality. Ultimately we all form one community in the Church!

4. These spiritual seekers, coming from lay circles, bring a rich experience of life with them. They are graced with a diversity of charisms, all meant ultimately to build up the ecclesial *koinonia*, and these have to be discerned, promoted and supported. A certain initiation to spiritual life may have to be given so that they can respond to the demands of the Spirit. But a bonding with a permanent commitment should not be demanded from them. We need to explore flexible forms of consecrated life other than those with the three permanent vows. Perhaps the time has come that the traditional pattern of a rigid *religious* community with the three vows does not enthuse young seekers any more. This *crisis* of the traditional community is a call to explore other forms of consecrated life. It may happen that a lay person joins the community with an open mind to live for a few years an authentic spiritual life. If that person quits the community he / she still becomes more effective in the wider ecclesial community. In this sense

there is no loss of investment at all. The Maryknolls in USA and some Franciscan communities in Europe make the experiment of incorporating lay seekers to their Institute. A community with doors open to the wider ecclesial and civic society is a community deeply inserted to the wider society. This however demands a radical rethinking on the part of those living inside the securities of the traditional *religious* communities.

5. The incoming spiritual seekers may be from all walks of life, as individual or as husband and wife together. The structures of the religious houses have to be adapted to the needs of the times. If they try to carry the past to the future they are envisioning a future which does not come true at all. Let us remember the warning of Jesus: Let the dead bury the dead; you move with the Kingdom of God. (Mt. 8:22) The communities of consecrated life in future will have to be flexible communities, not insulated by thick walls, not structured by strict rules, not unduly hanging on to the past. They are *basileic* communities with a living witness to the Kingdom of God that evolves with the ever widening horizons of the Spirit. They are communities *on the way* (Acts.9:2) exploring the grace and call of the Spirit. Even spiritual seekers from other religions should feel accepted and respected in these communities. In a country like India this has a special relevance.

The Ashram Heritage

Here we can learn a lot from the ashram tradition of India. Ashrams are the spiritual power houses open to seekers of all castes, creeds and cultures. In an ashram any spiritual seeker of any religion will feel at home, for an ashram is characterized by a contemplative atmosphere and a simple life-style. There are about 70 ashrams of Christian initiative in India, which somehow point to the direction that the traditional religious Institutes have to explore. (S.Painadath SJ, ed. Solitude and Solidarity, Ashrams of Catholic Initiative, Delhi: ISPCCK, 2003) We could learn a lot from the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of consecrated life. In Hindu ashrams spiritual seekers of the third phase of life find a spiritual home. Some stay there for a definite period of time, some on a life-long commitment. They take up a simple service at the ashram and live a life of intense spiritual discipline. Even if they return to

active life later, they go with deep spiritual experiences. In Buddhist monasteries the young ones are initiated to spiritual discipline, but most of them leave after a certain period of training. After several years of family life they can return in the third phase of life and rejoin the community. In some Buddhist monasteries there is a ritual of de-robing and re-robing. What we can learn from both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions is that a permanent commitment with the three vows should not be made obligatory for all in living a consecrated life. The inspiration and foundation for consecrated life we get from the Gospels. In dealing with the disciples Jesus did not bind them with vows and structures. He accompanied them and guided them on the way to the Father. An ongoing spiritual accompaniment with an unconditional openness to the *Spirit that blows where it wills*, is the hallmark of a community of consecrated life in future.

Sameeksha Ashram
Kalady -683 574

Remembering Thomas Kochery

A Prophetic Theologian and a Mystic of the Market-Place



FR .THOMAS KOCHERRY C. Ss.R

Date of Birth : 10-05-1940

Ordination : 20- 04-1971

Death : 03-05-2014

Religious life and new challenges

**“ The story of my religious life is a
Constant struggle for justice and the
Values of the Kingdom of God”**

Fr. Thomas Kocherry

Thomas Kochery literally slept in the Lord exactly a week before his 75th birthday! In the early morning of 3rd May, 2014 at 4.30 I received an e-mail from him. He was worried about the outcome of the general elections! He could not see his beloved country being divided on communal lines with the consequent destruction of the ideals enshrined in the Constitution of India. He was worried about the development mantra that was chanted during the electioneering in favour of the corporate sectors, multi-nationals at the cost of the lives of the poor all over the country especially the Tribals, the Dalits and the fish workers for whose well-being he dedicated his life.

Many know Tom as a trade union leader, environmentalist, lawyer, social activist, one of the leaders of the national and international Forum of Fish Workers and active member of Indian National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM). But I know Tom as a contextual theologian for more than 20 years! He did not hold any doctorate in theology from any university or ecclesiastical institute but his theological reflections emerged from the multiversity of the life of the poor and the marginalized sections of the society. His thunderous prophetic voice amplified the silent cry of the oppressed and exploited in the society and raised questions about our faith in a God who is deeply involved in human history! He was an active member of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) and participated in all its annual meetings and seminars without fail. His down-to-earth-approach to God-talk could challenge the tendency of some theologians to make God-talk or theology too abstract, mysterious and other-worldly! At my request, as the section editor of Jeevadhara May issues, he wrote articles on Jesus' relations to society and the implications of our faith in him which he published later as a booklet, *Faith in Jesus: A Passionate Call for Liberation*. Tom emphasized the prophetic commitment of Jesus. According to him, our faith in Jesus demands that we move away from ritualism and dogmas towards liberation experience and prophetic proclamation.

Tom could experience God's presence intensely in the daily life of all who are struggling to secure the basic necessities of life including their recognition as humans with inalienable rights. He could sense the absence of God when the markets were manipulated by the powerful,

forests were cut down by unscrupulous traders of timber, and trolling destroyed the lives of ordinary fish workers. By committing himself to change the situation he wanted to experience God's presence in the midst of it. Like Jesus he identified himself with the fisher workers and the poorest of the poor in the society. He was courageous to raise his voice against all forms of injustice without caring for its consequences. Like all prophets he had to suffer terribly when he saw the organization he built up not only abandoned him and his ideals but also hurled false accusations against him and spread calumnies about him. Tom suffered bitterly in those days and months but he consoled himself by accepting them as a sharing in the passion the Lord, whom he followed closely till the end of his life. Tom lived his theology not as an academic knowledge but an experience of the suffering God and he raised his prophetic voice without any fear or favour. He continues to live not only with his Lord but with us who are touched and inspired by his life.

Jacob Parappally

Book Review

Felix Wilfred, *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, Chennai, India: Asian Center for Cross Cultural Studies, 2014.

Felix Wilfred has done us a great service by editing this comprehensive book about Christianity in Asia. We at the United Board are honored to have supported this important intellectual project, and recommend it to scholars and educators in our network throughout the region.

Over four years, Dr. Wilfred and his international editorial board brought together 35 of the best scholars in the world to write special essays for this book on a vast array of themes from a variety of disciplines. Part I sets the vast stage of this work with five essays on the regional history and geographic diffusion of Christianity in West, South, Southeast, East and Central Asia.

Part II goes immediately beyond these territorial notions of "Cross Cultural Flows and Pan Asian Movements of Asian Christianity." Here we find seven studies of Pentecostal and charismatic churches, contextual theologies, the ecumenical movement, the rise of feminism, new religious movements inspired by Christianity as well as cross-cultural interpretations of holy scripture. Christianity and Asian cultures have mutually influenced each other for centuries. "The active role of culture and the agency of Asians are clearly manifest here."

This perspective on mutuality accelerates in Part III with a nine chapters that focus on "Asian Christianities and the Social-Cultural Processes." Here we find deep discussions of Christianity as shaped by the contentious forces of colonialism, nationalism and modernity. They include problematic issues such as conversion, peace and conflict, democracy and socio-political hierarchy, education, women's rights and the articulation of Christian values in the emerging public life of early modern Asian societies.

Christianity is a minority religion in most Asian countries. It grew over the centuries in the contexts of other dominant religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and the Confucian worldview in the Chinese world of Asia. These eight essays show how, in different ways, Christianity in Asia has grown up in lengthy and elaborate dialogue with these other faith traditions. This contrasts with Christianity in much of the West, where it was the dominant religion infused with the powers and expressions of the state. These ongoing encounters at personal and institutional levels with other Asian religions gives Christianity across Asia distinctive insights and practices essential to its survival and flourishing.

Minority voice for Christians does not mean something foreign to Asia, but as one of many minority groups whose religion and culture have lived in well-carved niches with mutual acceptance in the vast pre-modern empires of Asia. New concerns arise in this regard as some weak Asian states and ambitious politicians try to use latent fissures among religious communities to consolidate their powers and project constructed national identities.

The final section looks to the future of Christianity in Asia. Eight scholars consider how this diverse world religion may evolve in Asia with its social and cultural environments and dynamic regional economies. How will Christianity evolve as a form of public life, as skills of spirituality and as forms of worship? How will Christian communities change through urbanization, expanded education and migrations across the region? Will Christianity continue to inspire tribal and marginalized peoples who live on the edges of physical and social boundaries in Asian nations? A. B. Laksana writes in this context about "multiple religious belonging" and the formation of complex religio-cultural identities in Asia. Francis X. Clooney S.J. ends the volume with "In the Light of Asia: Reflections of a Western Christian." Indeed, we of the West have much to learn from Asian Christianity.

Dr. Wilfred's thematic and inter-disciplinary approach to collecting these essays on Christianity in Asia is refreshing. Asian Christians described in these chapters are subjects with agency rather than being passive recipients of an imported Christianity from the West.

“Everywhere operative is the process of *appropriation* of the Christian faith and institutions according to the genius of the various peoples and societies of the continent.” (p.7) Missionaries from the West played important roles, but the primary narrative is not simply their bringing the Good News to Asia. Indeed, Christianity rides many waves of migration and cross-cultural encounter within the region. The United Board’s work in strengthening Christian presence in Asian higher education fits precisely into this pattern of intra-Asian collaboration.

Wilfred doesn’t duck the questions of Christianity and the colonial powers in Asia. “Christianity was as much part of the colonial establishment as it was against it. It could germinate and grow with the explicit or tacit support of the colonial powers and bask under their protection; but it could also challenge the same colonial powers on a number of issues and take side with those dominated and exploited by those very forces. The legacy of Christianity in this respect is highly ambiguous and open to debate.” (p.8). The ecumenical sensibility of many Asian communities, for example, arose by transcending the denominational differences brought by missionaries from Europe and America.

We can also sense from these pages the ambiguity of the relationship between Christianity and modernity in Asia. Several chapters describe the role of Christianity in the process of modernization in Asian societies. “Ironically,” says Wilfred, “the very Christianity viewed in the West as an anti-modern force was looked to in Asia as a gateway to modern science, technology, education, (and) modern medicine.” (p.9) Christian colleges established in Asia over the past 200 years, for example, display the modernizing legacy of Christianity in Asian contexts. This is the legacy that the United Board seeks to strengthen and extend into the 21st century.

Glenn Shive
United Board